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THE HERMIT

CHARLES CLARK MUNN

Stanford University Memorial Fund



In tribute to

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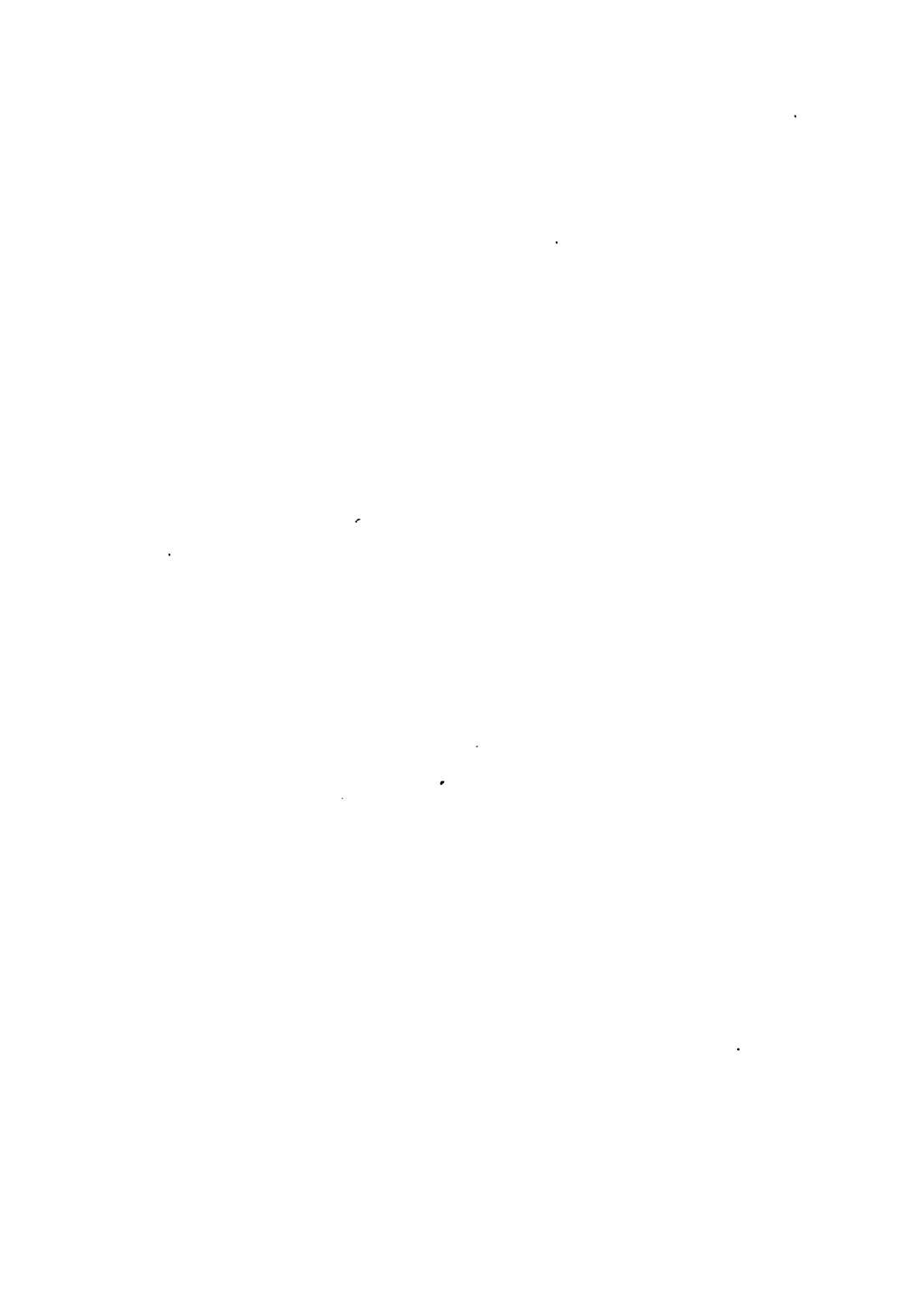
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THE HERMIT

A STORY OF THE WILDERNESS







"WHAT DO YOU MEAN — WHO IS HE" — Page 368

The Hermit

A Story of the Wilderness

BY

CHARLES CLARK MUNN

AUTHOR OF "POCKET ISLAND," "UNCLE TERRY,"
AND "ROCKHAVEN"

ILLUSTRATED BY A. BURNHAM SHUTE



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THE HERMIT

Dedication

*TO those who love the sparkle of rippled lakes
hid in the wilderness, the fir-clad mountains
lifting to kiss the clouds, the sweet laughter of running
waters, the glowing camp-fire chasing away the dark-
ness, the song of birds greeting the sunrise ; or whose
hearts vibrate to the memory of the old brown school-
house, the daisy-dotted meadows, the moss-coated mill
and pond smiling with lilies, and all the fond recollec-
tions of such happy childhood days, this book is respect-
fully dedicated by*

THE AUTHOR.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. FIRST LOVE	1
II. A CURIOUS FOOTPRINT	11
III. THE WILD MAN	25
IV. THE MYSTERY OF THE WILDERNESS	35
V. BESIDE A CAMP-FIRE	46
VI. A STRANGE PURSUER	52
VII. GHOST OR WILD MAN?	63
VIII. THE HERMIT'S HOME	70
IX. THE HERMIT	79
X. GREENVALE	88
XI. AUNT COMFORT'S ASYLUM	96
XII. GREENVALE IS DISTURBED	106
XIII. ILLUSION AND REALITY	112
XIV. AFTER MANY YEARS	123
XV. BOYHOOD MEMORIES	131
XVI. SUNDAY IN GREENVALE	142
XVII. ANGIE CURTIS	151
XVIII. OLD CY WALKER	161
XIX. DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND	170
XX. "THOU SHALT NOT STEAL"	179
XXI. "SCAR FACE, THE AVENGER"	187

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXII. A SHOCK TO GREENVALE . . .	197
XXIII. SUNDAY EVENING . . .	206
XXIV. VILLAGE GOSSIP . . .	215
XXV. A TASTE OF WOOD LIFE . . .	221
XXVI. JUST A FORMAL GOOD-BY . . .	233
XXVII. IN THE WILDERNESS ONCE MORE .	242
XXVIII. UNEXPECTED TROUBLE . . .	250
XXIX. A NIGHT JOURNEY IN THE WILDERNESS	261
XXX. A DESERTED CABIN . . .	271
XXXI. THE BIRTH OF NEW THOUGHT .	281
XXXII. AMZI CURTIS . . .	290
XXXIII. UNWELCOME VISITORS . . .	300
XXXIV. THE LAIR OF AN OUTCAST . .	310
XXXV. HOME BUILDING IN THE WILDERNESS	318
XXXVI. HALLOWE'EN . . .	330
XXXVII. NO MOURNERS . . .	338
XXXVIII. A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE . .	350
XXXIX. A NEW LIFE . . .	361
XL. A CONFESSION . . .	370
XLI. THANKSGIVING DAY . . .	380
XLII. A CHRISTMAS PRESENT . . .	389
XLIII. THE SPREAD OF HAPPINESS . .	396
XLIV. WEDDING BELLS . . .	403

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
“ What do you mean — who is he? ” <i>Frontispiece</i> .	368
One moment only he saw the gray, hairy visage .	24
“ They have souls, same as you and I ”	85
“ What'll ye give ? ”	176
“ Will you forgive me all these years of neglect? ” .	213
“ Mebbe God's concluded to be good to me now I'm gittin' old ”	265
“ Let's see your tongue agin ”	353
“ Here is your present,” she whispered	395

THE HERMIT

CHAPTER I

FIRST LOVE

THE camp-fire had burned low; the little zone of light barely outlined the open tent, the two canoes, bottom up, under which Levi and Jean were sheltered, and the narrow opening in the forest where Martin Frisbie and his boyhood friend, Dr. Sol, had camped for the night. In front of this a placid lakelet reflected the stars, while all about was a pathless wilderness, sombre and silent. For an hour these two, who had been village schoolmates, became reminiscent as they lounged beside the fire and smoked.

"And so Angie isn't married?" queried Martin, reaching forward to poke the embers together. "That's strange. As I recall her at the close of our school days, she was a more than usually pretty girl of a quiet common-

sense sort, one who would naturally become a home-maker. She still lives with Aunt Comfort, I suppose?"

"Yes," answered the doctor, "and keeps the South End school and has for ten years." Then, as if a new thought had come to him, he added: "Maybe she is waiting for you, Martin. I remember you used to be sweet on her in the old days."

Martin slowly blew a smoke ring aloft, for he, like every youth, had passed safely through the brief delirium of first love, which the bright eyes and red lips of Angie Curtis had occasioned.

"Yes, I must admit I was," he responded, "and do you know, doctor, now that you mention my callow spell, I wish I could go back to it and be just as big and happy a fool as I was then."

The doctor laughed.

"Better come up and tell her so," he responded, glancing at Martin's upraised face; "for all you know, she might be glad to listen, and as for being a fool over again — well, from what I hear, you can afford it now."

And Martin could, for he had made good use of the years since he and Dr. Sol were boys together, and had reached the goal of moderate wealth while yet in the prime of manhood.

"I'd like to see Angie," Martin added musingly after a long pause, "and have a good visit and laugh over our youthful silliness; but maybe she wouldn't speak to me now, if we met."

"Oh, pshaw, that's nonsense," returned the doctor, promptly, "and you know it. Angie isn't so silly as to retain a grudge against a boy admirer so long. Why do you imagine she would? Does your conscience smite you?"

"No-o-o," came the drawling answer, "and yet I think I didn't treat her just right, after leaving Greenvale. I was too busy making money."

And that night when the chat had come to an end, and Martin had crept into the tent and lay listening to the crackle of the dying fire, once more he lived over those fond and foolish days of his youth.

And how clear and distinctly they all came back, now that the pages began to turn! First

the school days, when Angie, in her little checked gingham pinafore, had chosen him as her rescuer in a game of "Stand in the Well," then the first spelling school and the walk home with her in the early autumn, when the Mizzy looked like a stream of rippling silver, and the moon cast mottled shadows along the maple-shaded lane which they followed. And what a delight it was to feel her small, soft hand on his jacket sleeve, and how scared he was when Aunt Comfort's was reached, and he felt impelled to kiss Angie. Then the next winter, and that never-to-be-forgotten sleigh-ride to Riverton, and the home-coming when the bells jingled so merrily, and he could feel that —

"The stars that oversprinkle
All the heavens seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight!"

And the sleigh runners creaked in the frosty snow when the horse walked, and how his arm nearly froze holding the robe around Angie! All the long winter evenings in Aunt Comfort's "best room," with its haircloth furniture, open fire, and shiny brass fire-dogs, came back, with

the popping of corn, the tin pan of seek-no-further apples, and bowl of cracked walnuts as side features of minor interest. There were other and equally charming occasions — moonlit evenings on Aunt Comfort's porch when the lilacs were in bloom and the fireflies twinkled over the meadow, long walks to a bridge across the Mizzy, where sweet flag grew, with many stolen kisses fragrant with flagroot, gathered as well, and dozens of other and equally delightful hours, with Angie as the one sole and supreme inspiration. But beyond these boyhood delights, and woven into his feelings like fine tendrils, was the memory of a dozen or more old-time Sabbath-school melodies she used to sing to her own accompaniment played upon a little droning melodeon. They were all from a collection called "Fresh Laurels," and that, with two more, one labelled "Songs of Zion" and the other "The Glee Club," composed her musical library. The first was her favorite, and the songs she usually entertained him with were "Give, said the Little Stream," "The Golden Rule," "Shall we gather at the River," "All the Way," and "Sweet Hour of Prayer."

There were others, of course, but these were so catchy he had soon learned them, and often joined his voice with hers. All the other episodes of their youth together had been more or less indistinct in memory, but these remained clearest of all, and now after many years, and amid the silence of night in the wilderness, he could see Angie's round, sweet face and earnest eyes as she sang those old, old songs of praise. Not only did these melodies return, but borne upon their cadence was every detail of the singer—her rounding figure, the tight-fitting, calico dress, the chubby fingers scarce able to span an octave, and the two long braids ending in bows of brown ribbon. And what a sweet picture she made in front of the low melodeon, her face upraised, with pink cheeks, white teeth, and red, ripe lips glowing in the lamplight. And later on, when the singing was ended and together they sat on the haircloth sofa, with the lamp turned low, he had felt that she was akin to the angels her songs had described.

For two years he had lived in a new and glorified world, building air-castles with her and

for her, as young Romeos ever have and ever will, and then came a sweet and yet painful parting, prolific of fond promise, but alas, like most, to fade into thin air.

For one year more they had exchanged tender missives, first weekly, then monthly, then irregularly ; and then ceasing entirely, as Martin, ambitious and hard-working in his new life, neglected them, and so the dream ended.

Five years later he returned to spend a Thanksgiving with his mother, and, though he met Angie at church and received a bow and a smile, he impolitely neglected to call. And then came the closing of his home, when his mother left the village to live with his only sister, now married and dwelling in Riverton, and Angie and Greenvale became but milestones on the highway of memory.

There is latent in every man's heart a long-cherished belief that she who was his early sweetheart must ever feel somewhat of the same tender interest in him. She may have married—become a mother, possibly a grandmother; he may have neglected her utterly and for long years, and yet, in his con-

ceit, it matters not ; she must and certainly does retain his face in her memory, and deep down in her heart, a little of the old first love.

Martin was no different from other men. He had lived the sweet illusion with Angie as its star ; then the great city—the fight for a livelihood, then a competence, and all the selfish cynicism instilled by contact with grasping greed, had levelled the beauteous air-castles and left Angie and all those fond and foolish ways mere incidents of the long ago.

Beyond that, he had escaped any more mature and dangerous entanglement, had grown sceptical of all things, and was a free-hearted, all-around good fellow, yet conscious of success ; and the only soft spot in his nature was a love for wood life. He had met Dr. "Sol" Finch, an old schoolmate, by chance in the city, and under the spur of this sportsman's instinct and desire to share its keen pleasures, had invited his boyhood friend to join in them.

And now the doctor was fast asleep, while Martin, lying on a bed of fir twigs, with the dying fire faintly glowing in front of the tent,

the low ripple of the near-by lake murmuring along the sandy shore, was once more listening to the old songs of Sabbath-school days, sung by his boyhood sweetheart, and living over those dreams of young love.

For a long hour, so keen was the spell, he wandered about that distant village, in fancy, and dwelt among bygones, and then suddenly he became conscious that some creature was stealthily crawling through the thick undergrowth back of the tent. Only the faintest sounds betrayed its presence,—the swish of a spruce bough brushed aside and returning to place, the breaking of a dead twig, the rustle of a dry leaf,—and yet, so perfect was the utter silence of that June night, each trivial sound reached him.

For a moment he listened, breathless, to this approaching prowler, then rose to a sitting posture, reached for his rifle, and, softly drawing the tent flap aside, peeped out. Whatever the creature was, its acute hearing had received warning, for now no sound issued from the surrounding thicket. For a seemingly long five minutes Martin peered out,

glancing from side to side of the little opening and to the canoes, beneath which lay the guides, and listened. He could hear their measured breathing, the faint ripple along the lake shore near by, and that was all. Then once more the creeping, crawling, stealthy movement in the tangle just back of the tent began again, this time slowly receding until it ceased.

A danger we can measure does not appal us, but the invisible menace of some animal creeping close to one's tent at night in the wilderness is another matter. It may be a harmless porcupine, but we are sure to imagine it to be a bear, panther, or wildcat,—at least Martin did,—but after a half-hour more of listening without result, except to get chilled, he gave it up and crept under his blanket again.

"I'd better not tell the doctor," he said to himself, and then fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

A CURIOUS FOOTPRINT

THE morning concert of song birds, always heard in the wilderness in May and June, was in full force when Martin crept out of the tent next morning. The sun was just peeping through the spruce tops, a film of thin gray fog covered the placid lake, and Levi had just started a fire. Then came the usual wash in the clear, cold lake water, the gathering around the bright fire to watch the guides cooking, the keen appetite for the simple breakfast of fried trout, ham, eggs, and coffee, eaten while sitting cross-legged on a moss-covered log, the packing up of their belongings, the launching and loading of canoes, and so the day began.

"We have an easy day ahead of us," observed Martin, when they were ready to start, "a good twenty miles up the Moose-

horn, which enters this lake close by, with no quick water or carries. We can reach the North Branch in ample time to make camp to-night and catch some trout there for supper." It was an attractive programme, almost unvarying for all such days in the wilderness, and so pleasant that the impress of the previous night's caller, creeping close to the tent, had almost vanished from Martin's mind. But it was soon recalled in an unexpected way, for Levi, always last to leave each camping spot, was about to enter his canoe and push off, when he paused, and stepping to one side on the bit of beach, stooped over, looking at something.

"What is it?" queried Martin, from the canoe.

"I dunno; you better come an' see," answered Levi.

Martin stepped out of the canoe and to where his guide stood, to be as much astonished, for there in the hard damp sand, close to the bank, was a queer footprint. It was longer than one made by a human foot, with the deeply indented claw marks of a panther.

Only these showed distinctly, for the heel mark was scarcely visible. It looked as if the creature making it had come out of the water and up on to the harder bank, where no track would show.

"Well," said Martin again, after a long examination, "what is it?"

"It's more'n I can tell," replied Levi, shaking his head and measuring the claw prints with a twig. "If he's a panther, he had longer claws 'n I ever saw, 'n' I never knew one to have a heel mark like that, or step in the water if he could help it. It beats me."

"What have you found?" called the doctor from his canoe out in the lake.

"Oh, nothing," answered Martin; "only the track of an otter," and he stepped into his canoe again and they paddled away.

Then he told Levi about their night visitor, creeping about the tent.

"I do not think it wise to tell the doctor or Jean," he said in conclusion, "or speak of this queer track. It's the doctor's first trip into the woods, and such things will alarm him unduly and spoil his enjoyment." And

so the singular footprint and its possible connection with the creature who had crept up to their tent at midnight was left behind.

Usually two sportsmen, in canoeing upstream especially, will keep along together, but somehow that day it happened that Dr. Sol and Jean were first to reach the junction of the North Branch with the broad and slow-running Moosehorn, and the lowering sun had left its valley in shadow ere Jean pushed his canoe ashore and the doctor stepped out. It was, as Martin had stated, a good camping spot, for the entrance to an old tote-road furnished a clear space, an endless procession of foam flecks on the Branch emerged from the shadow of its overhang and wheeled into the broader stream, while the music of a little cascade just back in the woods suggested trout.

"I wonder why Martin don't keep in sight," complained the doctor, first glancing up to where the sun had vanished behind the low range of mountains and then down the Moosehorn. "It'll be dark before we know it, and he's got the tent in his canoe. You

don't suppose anything's happened to them, Jean?"

"Not so when Levi Morris is paddlin'," answered Jean, "he one ver' safe man." Then, making a half scoop with one hand behind his ear, he added, "I hear 'em now, 'n' they 'bout half mile down."

Dr. Sol looked at his guide in admiration. To his unpractised ear no sound except that of running water broke the forest stillness.

"You may jis' so well go fish," continued Jean, turning to the canoe and taking from it a small axe, "zar be one ver' nice hole up ze stream few rod," and he pointed where a bush-choked opening showed that a tote-road had once been cut alongside the Branch.

Dr. Sol eyed it suspiciously. "No bears or panthers up there, Jean?" he queried.

"If you see him, he see you fust, an' you no see him," came the paradoxical answer, as Jean began cutting away the undergrowth with his hunting-knife, preparatory to the erection of a tent.

Dr. Sol reached for his rod, jointed it, still glancing furtively into the sombre wilderness,

and then down the stream again. "I wish Frisbie would keep up," he said, half to himself. "I want trout for supper, but I'm not just anxious to go into the woods alone after them."

But the floating foam flecks, the call of the running waters, and the love of sport conquered the forbidding forest, and with one more glance down the Moosehorn he started up the almost invisible path.

From the sound, the little cascade he could hear must be scarce ten rods in, but as he followed the old log road, now close beside the stream, and then bending away, while he pushed aside the undergrowth taller than himself, it seemed ever a little beyond. Just as his courage had nearly ebbed, the faint path turned down beside the stream once more, and here its current, merely fretted by a hidden ledge, was making the music that had lured him in. Like a boy now, in his eagerness, he adjusted his tackle, and with a short cast lightly threw the gaudy flies into the pool below, and let them float down. In an instant came a leap and splash as a pound trout took

the tempting morsel, and the sport began. One after another the little doctor reeled in, oblivious now to bears, panthers, or the solemn stillness of the wilderness, and happy as only a true sportsman can be.

A dozen had been tossed in rapid succession behind a rotting stump, when, forgetting the trees back of him, he hooked one limb hard and fast. To climb such a spruce, with branches so thick a squirrel only could do it, was impossible, and, with a muttered imprecation, the doctor pulled on his line until the delicate leader broke, and then sat down to repair damages. He had just done so and arisen, when the faint sound of a breaking twig caught his attention. With a quick glance across the stream, where a rocky and bush-hid bank faced him, he saw, in the darkening twilight, just above a brown, moss-covered boulder, a hideous, hairy, human face!

One instant only he saw it, the next it had vanished.

For a moment Dr. Sol, never a courageous man, stood still, while it seemed that icy water was leaping through every vein; the

next instant he turned and ran down the bush-choked path as if pursued by demons. Each moment, as he dove under bending boughs or leaped over fallen trees, he felt that a hairy, human monster was just behind and about to seize him.

When the camp-fire was reached, Martin had arrived and was cutting boughs with a hunting-knife, while Jean and Levi were just entering the tent. A fire had been started, a blackened pail had been hung from a stick over the flame, and preparations for a night in the woods were well under way. Into this little group leaped the terrified doctor, breathless, with face scratched and bleeding.

"Pack up, quick!" he exclaimed in a husky voice; "we've got to get out of here at once! There's a wild man back up in the woods, and I wouldn't stay here for a million dollars!"

Martin and Levi exchanged quick glances, and a halt came in the camping work. For a moment the two looked at one another, and then, as if recalling that curious footprint they had seen twenty miles away, they glanced fur-

tively up the bush-choked log road. One instant only Martin hesitated, and then he recovered himself.

"Doctor," he said, "I expected you would get well scared the first time you went into the woods alone, and I see you have. What you saw, most likely, was a blackened stump half hid in the bushes, or possibly it might have been a bear. If so, he is a mile away by now, more scared than you are. Here, take a drink, brace up, and help us to make camp. It's almost dark."

But Dr. Sol was obdurate. "I tell you, Martin Frisbie," he replied sternly, heeding not the proffered flask, "I wouldn't stay here a night for love nor money. We are watched; and by the most savage-looking creature I ever set eyes on." Then, with many additions, as might be expected, he told the story of his fright.

Martin and Levi exchanged knowing looks once more, but made no comment until the tale was told, and then Martin spoke.

"Levi," he said, "what do you say; is it go on, or stay?"

"We've got to stay!" came the resolute answer; "thar ain't a campin' spot within five miles either up or down the Moosehorn, and it's too late to cut one out!" And once more he began work.

As for Martin, he was inwardly nervous but outwardly calm. He had not quite recovered from the previous night's experience and the queer footprints, however, and yet it did not occur to him that that had any connection with the cause of the doctor's fright. And yet, it might have.

Then another thought came, and it added to his fears. They had started early and paddled a good twenty miles up an almost currentless stream; on either bank lay an impassable wilderness, much of it swampy. No hunter or trapper stealing along ahead had been sighted that day, and if this wild man the doctor had seen was he who was prowling around their tent the night before, how had he reached this spot?

But Martin had already decided upon his own course, and though startled somewhat by the doctor's fright, he now pulled himself

together once more and attempted to calm his frightened comrade.

"It may have been some hairy-faced, old trapper that you saw, doctor," he said finally, "and they are harmless. If it was, he will show up by and by, and hang around till we offer him a drink. I've met them many times here in the wilderness before, and a little good rum secures their friendship for life, so don't worry." And Martin resumed his cutting of boughs.

When supper was over and night had quite shut them in about the camp-fire, conversation was resumed and Levi told a story with the seeming intent of allaying the doctor's fears.

"Thar's a good many hunters 'n' trappers livin' up here in the woods somewhar," he said, "'n' thar's no tellin' when one on 'em 'll show up. I was campin' one fall, way up on the Allagash, me 'n' Pete Roncou, — that's a cousin o' Jean's here, — 'n' we had some traps set for otter. Well, thar was a storm coming up that night, an' though we'd been thar a week, we hadn't heerd a single loon, an' knew 'twas so late they'd all gone South, an' all

'twonce we heard one clus in shore. 'Pete,' said I, 'that's queer; we ain't heered a loon sence we came, 'n' now thar's one squallin'.' 'Tain't no loon,' said Pete, 'it's a human.' Well, a loon, long way off, sounds good deal like a human, but clus to, not a mite. In a minute it squaked agin, 'n' this time it sounded jist like 'h-e-e-e-l-p!'"

"'I tell ye, it's a human,' said Pete, an' with that we each on us grabbed a brand 'n' started. I don't just know what made me, but I grabbed my gun, too; but Pete, he never thought o' his'n. Well, we heerd it again, 'n' this time 'twas a reg'ler human holler fer help. We halloood back 'n' it answered 'n' we kept on goin' 'n' wavin' the sticks to keep 'em goin', an' finally they went out, an' arter they'd gone out, we kept on hollerin', but didn't git any back. We hed hard work to git back ourselves, tho', fer we hed to guess at it."

He paused, as if the sequel were not worth telling.

"Well," put in the doctor, "what then? Did you ever find what it was?"

"Not 'zactly, but we sorter guessed from the

moccasin tracks 'twas an Injun that had sneaked into our camp while we was loon huntin', fer Pete's gun an' all our shells was missin'. That was more'n ten years ago, 'n' Pete ain't heerd the last on't yit."

"Are there many Indians wild in these woods now?" queried the doctor, glancing up to where the zone of firelight outlined the entrance to the old tote-road; "I thought they were all civilized."

"So they are," replied Martin, not waiting for Levi, "and that's why some of them adopt white men's methods of getting what they want."

"But the face I saw belonged to a white man," interjected the doctor, who had not recovered from it, "and it wore a most demoniac look, with grizzly hair all around and a mat of it on top."

"That may be," returned Martin, "and so would any old trapper look when you saw him. They never shave or get a hair cut from one year's end to another, and all look alike—ragged, hairy, and dirty. I've met them often, and, as I told you, they are all harmless and love rum. If you saw one,—which I doubt,—he

is like all the rest, and by now is fast asleep up back of here in the bushes."

With that Martin arose, for it was time to turn in, glanced first at the starlit sky and then up at the opening in the forest back of the tent. At that moment Levi chanced to throw a handful of fir boughs on the dying fire, and as the flames flashed in response and the zone of light widened, Martin caught the full view of a hideous human face peeping out from behind a stunted spruce.

One moment only he saw the gray hairy visage; the next it had disappeared.



ONE MOMENT ONLY HE SAW THE GRAY, HAIRY VISAGE — Page 24



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CHAPTER III

THE WILD MAN

THE wilderness has many moods—grave, gay, grand, and mysterious. The morning melody of the birds in spring, the laughter of brooks deep hidden in impassable thickets, the loud-voiced rapids leaping down rock-walled gorges, the fir-clad mountains that shut one in, the bending spruce and cedar mirrored in placid lakes, — each and all have their own mood and leave their own particular impress on one's feelings.

But back of these and ever in waiting is the unvarying and ever present mystery of the solemn forest. To a novice in the woods there is a certain weird Presence ever existent in these solitudes; a subtle, invisible mystery scarce comprehended and impossible to explain. To look into never penetrated and almost im-

passable forest glades is to half expect to see some new and hideous shape, some strange creature glaring out of shadow. Walk in a little, and this lurking sense of danger increases — you stop, listen, look about, then go on, declaring to yourself that you are not afraid, and yet you are. The woods seem thicker and darker, rocks take on animal shapes, or, half hid beneath fallen trees, resemble gnome faces or ogre forms, shrinking in hiding. Penetrate a little farther and every tiny sound becomes magnified. A bird flitting by is like the rush of an eagle; an owl's hoot, a crash of thunder; a squirrel hurrying away, the rapid footsteps of a fierce savage. You can hear your own heart beating. A sense of near danger ever increases, and the deeper into the pathless forest you go, the more the supernatural, ominous sense of invisible menace — this face to face with some awful-Presence-feeling comes to you. You agree with yourself that it is folly — that there is nothing in the wilderness except beasts afraid of you, and for them you have a trusty rifle. You go on and on, each step a little weaker, till at last the Presence has con-

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quered and you retrace your steps to human companionship.


If this be the forest in daylight, what would it be in the inky blackness of night? Full well Martin Frisbie knew all wilderness moods, for he had met them many times. Yet, at the moment he saw this vanishing apparition, not to save all his wealth could he have pursued it into the darkness one rod. But he had good command of himself, and, uttering not a word, he turned and heaped more fuel on the fire. Then he sat down beside it.

"Why don't you turn in?" exclaimed the doctor, who had already entered the tent.

"I will, presently; I want a smoke first." And Martin coolly filled and lit his pipe.

Then he heaped the fire with fuel as if ruddy flames were a protection, and lying down between it and the stream, and resting head on hand and elbow, he covertly watched the opening in the woods.

Presently Jean, the doctor's guide, yawned, picked up his blanket, wrapped himself in it and crept under his canoe. And now Martin arose, peeped into the tent, satisfied himself



that the doctor was asleep, and returned to the fire.

"Levi," he said in a whisper, "the doctor was right. We are watched by a queer-looking man. I saw him a little while ago, just back of the tent."

The two looked at each other a moment in silence and then at the dark opening in the forest.

"Well," whispered Martin again, "what was it?"

For answer Levi cautiously but quickly stepped to one side of the tent, knelt, stooped, and laid his ear to the ground. For full five minutes he lay prone, then beckoned to Martin to join him. He did so, and as the crackle of the fire died out, Martin caught the sound of a stealthy tread, at wide intervals, and slowly receding into the forest. Finally that ceased, and only the low murmur of the Branch broke the utter stillness.

Then the two arose and returned to the fire, now only a faint glow of embers.

"Well," whispered Martin once more, looking at his guide, "what was it?"

Levi shook his head.

"It sounded like a bear creepin' through the brush; they go that way."

"It wasn't a bear I saw."

"I know it," replied Levi once more, "and that's what beats me."

For a long time the two watched each other, listening to the faint voice of the stream, alert and keen lest any sound escape them. At last Martin spoke.

"Levi," he said, "we have spent many weeks in this wilderness together, and I know I can trust you. What I saw is a mystery, and we may solve it and we may not, but until we do, neither the doctor nor Jean must know we have been watched by this strange creature. As I told you, it's my friend's first visit to the woods, and timid as he is, if once he learned what I saw, no power could keep him here longer than it would take to get out. I shall try to convince him that he saw a rock or stump, and you must help do it." Levi nodded.

"I think I'll turn in now," continued Martin, "and you may as well."

But his faithful guide only put more fuel

on the fire and, taking Martin's rifle, sat down beside it."

"I'll keep watch a spell," he said ; "it's just as well."

When Martin, awakened by the first notes of the inevitable bird concert, emerged from the tent, the fire was still smouldering, and Levi rolled in his blanket fast asleep beside it. Without awakening him he picked up the rifle and carefully entered the old log road. Step by step he followed it, slowly and like a true woodsman, ever watching for signs of man or beast. The doctor's tracks, both going and coming, were plain, and when the path turned down to the stream, his rod was found ; but although Martin looked well about, not a solitary one could be found of the dozen or more trout claimed to have been caught. Martin saw the stump back of which the doctor had thrown them, saw his tracks on the soft bank — grass trampled, bushes broken — and that was all. Then he looked across the stream, and there too was the boulder from behind which this wild man had glared.

Cautiously, and peering often up and down

the stream and into the thick forest, now gray with morning light, he crossed, stepping from rock to rock just out of the water. Back of the boulder the rotting leaves showed fresh disturbance, and from its side bits of damp moss had been scraped. Then he noted the faint forest sign of leaves that had been trodden upon or turned over, leading up the brook and beneath the overhanging firs. Only a few rods he followed them, for the undergrowth was more than dense, and then he returned to the crossing. Here, on a bit of sandy bank, washed up by the spring freshet, he saw that same footprint once more—a huge, horrible track, half brute, half human, with the heel mark of a man's foot round and deep, and the toe mark of a panther's claws! Involuntarily he cocked his rifle, looked about, and listened.

Only the morning light, now bright and clear, the low note of the stream at his feet, the song of birds!

He stooped and measured those claw prints with a twig as Levi had. A full inch in depth they were, with a spread of at least five inches—wider than the largest human foot.

Then he turned back to where the doctor had stood and fished. Here, unobserved at first, and distinct in the doctor's tracks, Martin found the claw prints again.

Once again he listened long, looking all about and half expecting to see that face in the dense undergrowth. Then, as the intangible menace grew upon him, he turned and almost ran down the bushy path to the camp.

Levi only was up, and he was just starting a fire. Without a word Martin beckoned him to follow, and together they returned to the puzzling tracks. Like an Indian trailing his enemy in the pathless forest, so did Levi now follow and examine those footprints. All about where the doctor stood he traced them, then back and up the old wood road to where a fallen tree blocked the way, while Martin watched his every motion. And here that keen woodsman, peering into these interlacing boughs, suddenly reached up to one, and, detaching something, held it up to the light. It was a long, white hair!

With intense interest Martin looked at that somewhat curly token of a human scalp which

his guide held aloft, then, taking it between thumb and finger, quietly wound it into a tiny coil and placed it in his pocket-book.

"Well," he said at last, "what is it?"

"It's a critter that walks on two legs," responded Levi, slowly shaking his head, "but them tracks is cur'us. I never knowed an Injun with white hair, either."

To Martin this was a new possibility.

"He come down this path," continued Levi, as he slowly led the way back, half stooping, the better to watch for tracks, "'n' he went back the same way, steppin' strong, 'n' on his hind legs."

"It's a human being, then," put in Martin, as they reached the stream again and halted.

"Yes, it's a human, mebbe," admitted Levi once more, shaking his head, "only them tracks ain't."

For a moment Martin pondered. And in that instant a dilemma confronted him. To obey his keen hunter's instinct and follow this strange creature into the wilderness, he could not with timid Dr. Sol on his hands; neither did he dare even to let his old-time friend know

what a strange creature had watched them. And suppose he were alone, with his trusted and faithful guide, and they should follow and come upon this mysterious animal — this possible beast or possible man — what then?

“Levi,” he said suddenly, his mind made up, “we must get out of here as soon as we can pack and start. And mind you, not one word or hint to Jean or the doctor.”

Jean was busy cooking breakfast, and Dr. Sol watching and sniffing the pleasant odor of the frying ham, when Martin and Levi reached camp.

“Well, did you see the wild man?” queried the doctor.

“No,” answered Martin, smiling, “but we saw the big gray rock that scared you, and found your rod where you dropped it. I think a mink carried your trout off — that is, if you caught any.”

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERY OF THE WILDERNESS

MARTIN's first impulse had been to pursue and solve the identity of this half-human, half-brute creature who had peeped into their camp-fire circle; the next, and kindlier one, to avoid alarming the timid doctor and pay no heed to it, but go on as planned. But resolving and doing are wide-apart impulses, not always reconciled, and although Martin was not one whose mind turned like a weather-vane, yet while he was cheerfully deceiving Dr. Sol, his thoughts were away in the shadowy forest, pursuing an ogreish creature. Neither did his will banish this mystery in the least, for when breakfast was disposed of, tent struck, canoes loaded, and they paddled away up the Moosehorn, its clutch was still upon him. All that bright morning, while they pushed up the winding and almost currentless stream, now

shadowed by spruce and then broadening into long and narrow lakelets, faintly rippled and sparkling in the sunlight, its spectral hand reached out from every shadowy opening. Over and over again had he and Levi discussed this strange visitor, only to fail of reaching any tangible solution or solve any part of the mystery, and when noon came, and they halted where a short rapid compelled a carry, Martin had hard work to keep from making a clean breast to the doctor of all he had seen and imagined. Then, as if to drive him to confession, here at this landing he came upon two more mysterious discoveries.

They had decided to cook dinner here, and as usual, while the guides prepared it, Martin and the doctor tried for trout. Both made a few casts in the same pool below the rapids, and then Martin, leaving his friend, started up the path that led around the rapids to try in another pool. With more thought for tracks than trout he walked slowly, half stooping and scanning every spot where one might show. None were found until the path ended at the stream once more, and here, on a bit of sandy margin,

and as if the creature had stepped out of the water, were the same broad and well-marked claw prints. Then, turning back, now that he had found the trail, and, with hunter's cunning, locating where the next step should be, he found a dozen others, though so faintly defined that only the prints of sharp claws were visible in the hard soil, or a bit of moss scratched from a stone showed where the animal had stepped. All pointed down-stream and were made as the others were — by a creature walking upright!

Then, leaving the path and crowding through the undergrowth to an eddying pool in the rapids, Martin made a cast. It scored, and then another and still another speckled beauty was hooked and reeled in, and the keen zest of time, place, and sport had, for the moment, obliterated all other thought, when, in stepping from one rock to another above, he saw, wedged between them, a curious bit of driftwood, one end of which seemed to grin at him. It was that that caught his eye, and stooping, he pulled it from between the rocks and found it to be the handle of a broken paddle, with the knob carved into semblance of a human skull. So

realistic had this unknown artist tried to be, that he had inserted a row of small, catlike teeth in the skull's mouth and dyed the eye and nose sockets red. The sun and rain had almost removed this, but the teeth still held in place. It was a curious bit of flotsam, evidently tossed up and caught between the rocks during some freshet, and then left to bleach in sun and storm. It had seemingly been so exposed for more than one year, for it was almost white. It did not appeal to Martin as having any connection with the mystery he had come upon, but merely as the long-ago handiwork of some eccentric trapper or hunter thus killing time. It was a curio, but when he returned to the canoes at call to dinner, he said nothing, but quietly tucked it into the bow of his canoe.

When dinner was over, the doctor, who wanted to fish most of the time, returned to his pool, Jean began washing the dishes, and then a look and nod from Martin to Levi were enough, and together they walked up the path.

"Our friend of last night came down this way not long ago," asserted Martin, quietly,

pointing to the best-defined tracks on the stream's bank, "and now can you tell me when?"

Levi kneeled and studied them well. Then glancing up to the sun, and back to where one track just emerged from the shadow of an outgrowing spruce bough, he moved up to that, and again bent low.

"Yesterday; 'n' late in the afternoon at that," he answered.

And it was fully ten miles of almost impassable wilderness—that is, by land—to where they had encamped the night before!

For a few moments Martin looked at his guide, and then at those tracks in silence.

"It's beyond me," he said at last; and the temptation to tell the doctor all, and then return to where they had camped and pursue this strange creature, was strong upon him.

"If it's a sane human being," he continued, "he would have made himself known to us last night; if some half-insane old hermit or trapper, even then I think he would. Even if it was a wild man, the sight of us and our fire would also have drawn some cry or expres-

sion of human kinship from him. But to look at us in grim silence from out the darkness, and then steal away like some hunted animal, was — uncanny."

"It was a human fast enough," put in Levi, "'n' nothin' else. Bears stand up once in a while, but run on four legs. The only other critter that don't is an ape, 'n' no ape was ever known in these woods."

When once more the two canoes were under way, and had ascended the Moosehorn a few miles, the stream seemed to lose itself in a dismal swamp filled with dead fir trees. They stood out above the green undergrowth like bleaching skeletons, with here and there a lane of black waters between — a forest Golgotha of whitened cones, gaunt, spectral, and ghostly. A crow, perched upon one, cawed ominously, and, as if to add an uncanny touch to this forest graveyard, the horizon, now opening wide, had grown hazy, and the lowering sun red as blood. None but a woodsman like Levi could thread that maze of lagoons twisting and turning into one another, and when they were crossed, and the canoes once more

entered the now lessened Moosehorn, the overhanging spruce and fir seemed doubly welcome. A mile up, the banks grew bolder, with now and then a frowning cliff, moss covered, over which the spruce roots crept downwards, twisting and turning like arms of gnomes. Here a scattered procession of foam-flecks was met, and soon the murmur of running waters broke the forest stillness. Low and sweet it tinkled like tiny bells just ahead, and ever elusive, for a dozen turns in the winding stream were rounded ere an opening in the banks showed where the brook entered. Its mouth was broad and rippled, and out of idle curiosity, Martin, who was also paddling, turned the prow of his canoe into it and up a little way. Only a couple of rods, for it soon narrowed, and here, scarcely noticeable, and only to the trained eyes of a woodsman, were the faint signs of a path leading up the bank. Not one well trod, but rather a divided path where some one had pushed the thick growth aside, or had broken branches to reach the brook.

Curious still, Martin nodded to Levi, and

as the canoe was pushed ashore, both stepped out and began an examination.

"What are you looking for?" questioned the doctor, who had come up.

"Bear tracks," answered Martin, reaching for his rifle, and following Levi up the stream, at which the doctor scrambled hastily ashore and followed them.

The faint signs soon converged into a distinct path, keeping close to the stream for perhaps two hundred rods, then turning to the right, it skirted the base of a low ledge until it reached and led up through a narrow pass. Like two hounds on the scent, Levi and Martin had followed this, ever stooping and watching for footprints, with the doctor close behind, until a defile was reached, when he suddenly exclaimed:—

"For God's sake, Martin, look up!"

And well he might, for, perched upon a projecting shelf of rock above them, white and ghastly in the forest gloom, was the bleached skull of an enormous moose.

Such a relic of some hunter's prowess is not uncommon in the wilderness, and ordi-

narily would excite no comment, but here and now it seemed to Martin a grewsome warning, and, in some mysterious way, connected with the creature he had seen the night before.

For a full minute he was spellbound by that object, placed where it was with evident and sinister intent, then he turned to Levi. Not a word was uttered, yet in that long meeting of eyes, one and the same question was asked, and for it there was no answer.

And standing there, face to face with the Great Presence, always invisible but ever existent in forest solitudes, with only the low prattle of the distant brook disturbing the utter silence, almost did that Something conquer and turn them back. Almost, I say, and yet that does not express it, for so delicate is the division between courage and cowardice in us all, that had there come to them at this moment the sound of a limb creaking in the breeze, or even the rustle of leaves, as a squirrel hurried away, the Presence would have won.

But the stillness, so profound it could be felt, was unbroken, and soon Martin, gaining cour-

age, moved on up the ridge, followed by the rest. And now stepping slow and oft halting to listen, he soon saw an opening just ahead, and, looking down through the thick growth, they saw a tangled confusion of fallen trees, perhaps thirty rods in breadth, and, beyond and close beside a wall-like cliff, a small log-cabin. It was dim and shadowy down in this narrow vale, for the twilight had come, and as Martin pushed through a thicket closing the path, he moved aside a small sapling barring the way, and at that moment, up from this lone and lonely cabin, faint and yet distinct, came the tinkle of a bell!

In an instant he stepped back, and as this traplike trigger swung into place, he saw it was bound to a small sapling with a thong of deer-skin, while around its butt was wound a fine wire. From this, and barely visible, the wire led away down the ledge toward the cabin. Curious now, as well as startled by this queer human contrivance, Martin once more moved the swinging stick forward to hear again the answering tinkle. Twice, thrice he repeated this, his eyes on the cabin below; and then he

saw the one little and closed window-slide in it open halfway for an instant, and then close quickly. It was too dark to see more than the motion of this slide, but it was unmistakable. The cabin held an occupant.

Ordinarily Martin, like any other pleasure-seeker in the wilderness, would have descended to this cabin and made a friendly call; but the time, place, and mystery, as well as evident threat of this warning signal, were enough. Without a word he stepped quickly back, and so potent is the weakening of any leader, that the doctor, just in the rear, turned on the instant and ran as if pursued. And it must be recorded that Martin and Levi reached the canoes almost as soon. Neither was any discussion indulged in, for night and darkness was near, and by tacit consent, canoes were pushed off and all tumbled in, the doctor and Martin each grasping the spare paddles and using them until that ill-omened landing was left a full mile astern.

CHAPTER V

BESIDE A CAMP-FIRE

It was almost dark ere a possible camping site was reached, and this was in no way desirable, for the low banks of the Moosehorn just here were soft and spongy, while from every twig of the tall and close-growing spruces depended long tufts of gray moss. But coming night in the wilderness forced the situation, and all four set about establishing a camp.

First a fire, then the tent, and while the guides started supper on its way, the doctor and Martin cut boughs for a bed and then stowed their belongings. And right in the midst of these duties, and just as the fire lit up the spectral beards that hung above and all about them, Dr. Sol found the broken paddle handle. For a moment he gazed at its hideous knob with something like terror, and then turned to Martin.

Now all that day the doctor had felt that

some uncanny discovery, some new and near danger had been kept from him; and more than this, that some mystery quite beyond human ken now surrounded them. As he would put it, "What I saw, I know I saw," and none of Martin's badinage about imaginary ogres had in the least altered his fixed convictions as to what he had seen the night before. Then at noon he had also observed the peculiar movements of both his friend and Levi, but said nothing; and when they had landed to follow the mysterious path, what they had come upon and its denouement only added more mystery. But this piratical bit of handiwork was the last straw, and, as one might say, it broke the doctor's nerve.

"Martin Frisbie," he exclaimed almost sternly, "where are we, and what is the meaning of this? First I see a hideous human face watching me, which you swear is a rock; then you go on all day, looking and listening in glum silence, while I follow, through ghostly swamps and up unaccountable by-paths, to face grinning skulls and find queer things. Then you run away as if

scared yourself, and make no explanation until now, when we are halted by night where no sane human being can be comfortable. Have you gone daft, or have we come into a region haunted by hobgoblins? Why, even the trees have ghostly whiskers; and what is the meaning of this death's head staff I found in your canoe? If this is the joyous life of freedom in the wilderness you promised me, I have had enough of it! I want to go home. Greenvale may be dull and slow, but at least it isn't haunted by ogres." And the decidedly frightened doctor looked at the grinning knob once more.

"Now keep cool," answered Martin, half inclined to laugh in spite of his own nervousness. "In the main you are right, only I've been trying to save you from getting scared, which would spoil your outing. You did see some strange creature last night, for I saw it myself after you had turned in, and also its tracks where you met it, and this noon again on the carry where I found that bit of driftwood. Whether this man or brute—and I don't know which—had any connection with

that hid-away log-cabin or not, I can't say. I shall keep no more from you and shall tell you now that that hut was occupied, and I'll admit I felt it best to retreat in good order. We have come upon some wilderness mystery, though not a ghostly one, and yet I confess it beyond me. In fact, I think we have found two, for the creature who watched us last night and the occupant of that cabin are not the same. Another point, and I'm sure of it,—the hermit, who peeped out of his one sliding window a moment when we rang his bell-trap, doesn't want any callers, for such a contrivance here, a hundred miles from civilization, said plainly, 'If you don't want a hole bored in you, keep away!' It may be some escaped criminal in hiding, or it may be some half-insane old trapper who doesn't want visitors. We are not here on a man hunt, however, and if we mind our own business, I think this fellow will do the same, and tomorrow we will push on." Then, as an afterthought, and to test the doctor's courage, he added: "If you feel curious, or as a matter of medical research would like to return and

visit that hermit and see if he is sane, we will go back with you in the morning. We could all stay out of sight and let you make the call alone, so as not to excite him."

But the doctor was not in a mood to appreciate Martin's pleasantry, and only glanced furtively around where the zone of light ended among the spectral trees and then at the cheerful fire.

"Don't you think we'd best let that go out when supper is cooked?" he said; "it may be seen by that chap, and he may visit us again."

But another and not at all pleasant experience was to follow, for before the potatoes were boiled, or ham and eggs quite ready, the wind began to blow, then the rain that had threatened all the afternoon followed, and that supper, eaten in the tent and by the light of a pine knot, was not all that could be desired. The guides, however, kept the fire going, while Martin and the doctor, peeping out of the tent, smoked and discussed the queer mystery they had come upon. It was not a pleasant camp, or even a comfortable one, for the wind, roaring in the dense canopy

of spruce tops, the creaking and moaning of the tall trees bending and rubbing together, added a peculiar touch to their somewhat ghostly surroundings.

But nothing more occurred to disturb them, and when morning and blue sky once more returned, never before in his life had the clear light of day seemed so great a blessing to Dr. Sol.

CHAPTER VI


A STRANGE PURSUER

COVERING two-thirds of Maine and a portion of Canada and New Brunswick is a wilderness many hundred miles in length and breadth. It is divided by ranges of mountains, dotted by countless lakes, traversed by innumerable streams, some running north into the St. Lawrence, some east into the bay of Chaleur, and some south into the Atlantic. These serve as, and are, the only highways. Sportsmen enter this wilderness a little way, rarely does one cross it; lumbermen follow up its streams to cut their quota of logs and return the same way; and yet so broad is it, and so impassable by direct journey, that events happening on one side are rarely known on the other. It is a world by itself, as it were, scarcely surveyed, with townships of primal wilderness seldom crossed, lakes that for years

remain unvisited, and mountains that are rarely scaled.

It was the bold intention of Martin and the doctor to cross this for an outing trip; and now, scared for a day and a night by the visit of a queer creature, they had gone on, leaving its locality many days' journey behind, and yet vividly retaining the impress it made.

A bugaboo is like your shadow, and a mystery unsolved will follow as well, more especially in a vast wilderness, and although Martin, out of consideration for his timid friend, had turned away from this, somehow it still seemed that sooner or later it would make itself manifest again; and whether floating down or slowly ascending streams each day, he watched ever for some sight or sound of this creature in the bordering forest. He never landed on a stream's bank or lake's shore but he looked for those uncanny tracks, and at night when smoking by the camp-fire and chatting with the doctor, he watched ever where the circle of light merged into the darkness, half expecting to see that strange face glaring at him once more. If such was the



effect on Martin, that upon the doctor could not fail to be far more powerful.

For two weeks they had journeyed onward, up-stream, down-stream, and across lake and carry, halting to try for trout in seductive pools or land at some available spot and cook a midday meal. Deer browsing upon the first green shoots had been surprised many times; twice they had come upon a lordly moose, to hear it snort with affright and plunge out of sight in the undergrowth. Once a bear had been seen scampering up an old log road, and often at night had they heard a lucivee or panther uttering its peculiar cry in some neighboring swamp. Of humanity, they had met not a soul in all that time; and now, somewhat wearied of ever continued pushing on, they had camped on the shore of a long and narrow lake to remain and rest a few days. This, known as the Second Musquacook, lay at the apex of two narrow valleys, through each of which flowed sizable streams. One, the larger, had served as their waterway to this lake, and entered at its foot the other midway. It was near this, and in a cove

outlined by a pretty sandy beach, that their tent was pitched. Above this stream, and extending well out into the shallow lake, grew a bed of rushes, now putting forth fresh shoots. This growth also extended up the stream a few rods, while next to the cove its bank was wooded, and where it joined the lake a rounded gravelled point put out. The sun was out of sight behind one of the low ranges of mountains that shut them in, ere the camp was made comfortable, and just as Levi had finished his watchful care of a frying-pan of trout and another of sputtering ham, and lifted the coffee-pot from the bending wambeck,¹ the moon, now almost full, looked over the opposite range.

"I wish," said the doctor, who had seated himself by the little improvised table of saplings, and heaped his tin plate with good things, "that we had stayed a few days longer on the Moosehorn and tried to run that wild man to cover."

¹ The Indian name for a small sapling thrust into the ground and sloping over a camp-fire, and upon which a pail or pot is hung.

Like many another man, Dr. Sol was always courageous when either well fed or about to be.

"We might go back there," answered Martin, with his mouth full of fried trout, while he gently stirred the condensed milk in his tin cup of coffee; "it isn't over a hundred miles."

"No-o-o," responded the doctor, slowly, "I don't believe we'd better; and yet, I'd go a good many miles to find out what that thing was."


Then Martin laughed, knowing full well how little courage Dr. Sol had.

Time and again they had discussed this strange problem in all its bearings, failing each time to arrive at a conclusion. Then, there were "two of him," as Jean once said, and about equal in mystery.

"I, too, wish we had stayed where I saw this creature," said Martin, in response to the doctor's assertion, "at least for one night. If it was some half-insane old trapper who wore moccasins tipped with panther's claws, as I more than half suspect, the latent human curiosity in such a freak would have led him to return the next night. There was no danger, for if he

had meant harm, he had ample chance. As to its being a nondescript, half man, half brute, as his tracks would indicate, I do not for one moment believe. Neither do I think he had any connection with the chap who has hid himself in the lone log-cabin up the Moosehorn, and who rigged a trap-bell signal to warn him of visitors. He is a cat of another stripe, and one I'd not care to disturb. What do you say, Levi?"

"I dunno, I dunno," replied that cautious woodsman, slowly shaking his head, "'cordin' to my way o' thinkin', it's the same feller, ez I've said afore now, an' mebbe some one ez had cause fer hidin'. There's a good many curis things ez happens in the woods, 'n' some on 'em never gits found out. I was up on the St. Francis loggin' 'bout ten years ago, 'n' thar was a feller in the camp that was took that sick he was like to die. It was over forty miles to a settlement by the tote-road, 'n' about twenty cross country. The snow was good 'n' hard for snow-shoein', 'n' ez I knew thar was a couple o' trappers winterin' on a lake that way, whar I could put up, I went the shortest cut. 'Twas



most dark 'fore I struck the lake, 'n' then I had to go two-thirds round, followin' the shore, 'fore I found the camp, 'n' when I did, 'twas pitch dark 'n' nobody in the cabin. All I had with me was a little pack 'n' a blanket, 'n' stay there I'd got to. I pushed the door open, slung my pack in 'n' then felt round 'n' found a birch 'n' peeled some bark, 'n' went in again 'n' struck a light, 'n' then looked round. I've been sot back a good many times, first 'n' last, but never quite so much ez that minute, fer right under my feet, almost, lay a dead man! The snow hed blowed in 'n' covered his legs, but his arms 'n' body wa'n't, 'n' his face was lookin' right up at me 'n' his eyes wide open. Fer a minute I come near turnin' tail, 'n' then I kinder ketched myself 'n' 'lowed he couldn't hurt me, 'n' I'd got to stay there anyway. Then I got a fire goin' 'n' pulled him up in one corner 'n' covered him. I couldn't make out to sleep a wink that night, though, 'n' didn't try to. All I did was keep the fire goin', 'n' I never knew afore that night how much company thar was in a fire. I kept on next day, 'n' when I went back to the lumberin' camp, I went the long way."

"And did you find out who it was," put in the doctor, eagerly, "and who killed him?"

"I dunno ez anybody killed him. The next Sunday, though, three on us started early 'n' went over thar, 'n' the curis thing was we didn't find no dead man. It had snowed some, 'n' thar wa'n't no tracks outside, either, 'n' then they made great sport o' me 'n' said I must 'a' gone daft."

"And was that all," inquired the doctor, who had never once ceased watching Levi's face; "didn't you ever find out anything more?"

"Not a word, though I did some askin' when I got down to the settlement that spring. It ain't strange, though, fer thar's a good many trappers ez goes into the woods 'n' never comes out, 'n' 'less they've got families, nobody wonders at it. Then agin, I wa'n't goin' to 'low I'd seen a dead man, fer if thar 'd been murder done, no tellin' but I might 'a' got into trouble 'n' cused on 't."

"And you think this chap who put a moose skull where it would do the most good might have been some murderer in hiding," queried

Martin, "or possibly the other one of those two trappers?"

"Wal, he might 'n' he mightn't," answered Levi, in his always cautious tone. "That was ten years ago, n' ten years is a long time for a man to live alone in the woods 'n' not go daft if he's cause to worry. If he ain't, he might live here forty 'n' keep fat."

Then, as this subject was about exhausted for the time, Martin and the doctor once more fell to recalling incidents of their boyhood days, and all the fun they had, and all the scrapes they got into then.

And as once before, when the evening's smoke and chat ended, the camp-fire low, and Martin had stretched himself on the bough bed beside the doctor, his thoughts travelled to Greenvale, and he wondered how Angie looked and what she would say, and how she would treat him if he were to go back there again.

Beyond that lurked a little sense of guilt at the thought of all the years that had fled since he parted from her in such a tender fashion, and how heartless it was, after all!

Then he wondered why she had never married. She was a comely girl, and once he thought her more than that — yes, even the sweetest and most beautiful maid in Greenvale.

Why was it some other village swain had not caught her fancy, after his desertion?

He knew she was an orphan, whose mother had died when she was quite young, and worse than that, her father had disappeared, no one knew why, nor whither, and that Angie had been left without an heritage, to be brought up by Aunt Comfort. It was a peculiar case; and now, as it all came back to him, and how, in her sweet, girlish way, she had laid her heart at his feet, so to speak, it seemed to him that one so fond, and so wholly dependent, was the last whom a manly young fellow should turn from and desert.

It was the bud of a boyish love bursting into flower again, for before Martin fell asleep, he had firmly resolved he would visit Greenvale at an early date and see how Angie would receive him.

But the next morning all these sweet impulses received a quietus, for while Levi and

Jean were getting breakfast, Martin and the doctor took their rods and started for the stream close by; halfway there Martin halted suddenly, looking down.

And well he might, for at his feet and freshly made in the hard, damp sand, were those same claw-print tracks he had twice found on the Moosehorn, a hundred miles away !

CHAPTER VII

GHOST OR WILD MAN?

MARTIN looked long at those grotesque footprints in speechless wonder. For two weeks now he had watched for them in old log roads, along the banks of streams, in the muddy spots of carries, and upon the sandy shores of lakes, in vain. He had found all other kinds of tracks in plenty, hoof prints of moose, deer, and caribou, the oval ones of bear, and the rounder but sharper clawed tracks of lynx and wildcat—but none like these. And now, on a bright moonlight night, the nondescript creature had walked up to within two rods of where he lay sleeping!

The effect on Dr. Sol was almost ludicrous. He gazed at them, grew pale, and with a "We've got to get out of here, and quick, too," started for the tent.

"Here he comes; run, doctor, run," shouted

Martin, his sense of humor rising above his astonishment, as he followed the doctor, who had covered the distance with leaps. Then each, grasping a rifle, and followed by the guides, returned to those tracks. And now for the first time, so plainly outlined were they in the deep sand, it was possible to better guess what manner of creature made them.

"It's a gigantic ape," asserted Martin, bending over them; but Levi, kneeling, shook his head.

"It's some one wearin' moccasins with claws on 'em. I kin see whar the seam comes," he said.

It was not reassuring, and both Martin and the doctor glanced furtively into the forest near at hand, and then up to the gravelled point where the stream entered. Then following Levi and avoiding the tracks, halting often to listen and look at one more distinct than the rest, they came to this point and the end of the tracks. Here a faint furrow showed where a canoe had grounded and been lifted out on the beach.

"It's a white man," asserted Levi, in a posi-

tive tone; "an Injun always lands a canoe sideways."

"And why?" queried Martin, to whom this was news.

"'Cause it don't strain 'em so much, an' leaves no sign."

"This chap wasn't fussy about the signs," interjected the doctor, "and if it's the beast I saw that night on the Moosehorn, I've had enough of his society."

"The tracks are the same beyond question," said Martin, "and it looks like a case of follow, but how he has kept along with us for ten days without discovery is curious." And the thought of such a savage man stealthily following one up-stream, down-stream, across lake and carry a good hundred miles of wilderness, made Martin nervous. "I'm not going to back out just yet," he added, as they retraced their steps to find the fire out and breakfast ruined. But that mattered not; in fact nothing was thought of or spoken about all that day except those hideous tracks and the likelihood that their maker might be lurking in the forest about. No attention was paid to the lake, rippled and

shining in the sunlight, the birds, piping defiance to all powers of darkness, or aught else of beauty. Both canoes made an entire detour of that lake's shore at least three times, while their occupants, oblivious even of the trout leaping out here and there, scanned the shadows, pausing oft to listen at every trifling sound. The entrances to two long, unused log roads were examined, the stream where they first entered the lake followed back a mile, and the one where the tracks began and ended explored a little way, but no sign or sound of this wild man found. Like a thief at night he had come ashore, stolen up to their camp, returned, embarked, and where he was hiding no man could guess.

When nightfall drew near, the doctor became nervous. "I shan't sleep a wink to-night," he said plaintively, as he watched Levi building a fire, and as the woods grew shadowy and darker, he kept close to the fire. Not for untold wealth would he have walked into that sombre, silent forest one-half mile alone—no, not even fifty rods.

Jean also was as scared as the doctor. Like

many of the half-breed guides who lead sportsmen into this wilderness, he believed most wild animals to be endowed with human cunning and devilish malice as well; that they might imitate human actions, and certainly could hear and understand human converse. He was positive bears could walk upright for miles and panthers cross lakes on logs, using sticks for paddles. He was certain that this wild man who had followed them was a combination of man and beast, a huge, hairy ape maybe, or a mixture of bear, panther, and man. Moreover, he believed in ghosts.

The piratical paddle handle found by Martin, the moose skull perched on the ledge, the night cries of loons on the lakes or wildcats in swamps, were all evidence of ghost existence and meant for death warnings, and when he heard them, he invariably crossed himself.

Under other circumstances this superstition would have been ludicrous, even to the doctor; now it added to the mystery.

Even Martin and Levi, both old experienced woodsmen, caught a little of this uncanny, eerie contagion, and when supper was over, pipes lit,

and there was nothing to do but converse in low tones and listen to the night sounds, their rugged common sense grew a little shaky. It became more so when the moon rose, filling the forest with rifts of spectral light and throwing ghostly shadows over the lake shore.

"You might ez well turn in," said Levi, when the hour had grown late, "me 'n' Jean 'll take turns keepin' the fire goin'," and this tacit admission of the need of watching was not reassuring to the doctor at least. But Martin had grown sleepy in spite of the mystery surrounding them, and led the way into the tent.

It might have been midnight or later—neither Martin nor the doctor thought of time that night—when they were awakened by Levi, who, without a word, beckoned them to arise. Then silently, wrapped in blankets, they followed him to the shore.

The moon was high overhead, the lake a sheet of burnished silver, the dark wilderness silent as a tomb, and as the little group looked up toward the head of the lake, there, close to shore and slowly moving toward them, was a dark object.

Between them and this object grew the bed of reeds, and as it advanced, almost at a snail's pace, it enlarged into the head and shoulders of a man, apparently wading waist deep in the water. Nearer and nearer it drew, while the breathless four watched it—now to the edge of the reeds, then entering them it almost vanished, to emerge and become distinctly of human shape, and without doubt a man astride a log or seated in a narrow canoe but few inches out of the water. Slowly, very slowly, he drew nearer, until where the stream entered the lake, he turned into it, and passed out of sight.

It is needless to say that there was no more sleep in the camp that night, but reclining about the friendly fire, the four men watched, listened oft, speaking only in whispers, until the moon sank into the sombre wilderness and the gray light of morn banished the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HERMIT'S HOME

SUPERSTITION is a mushroom, growing best in shadow, and the four, who at first believed they had come upon a wild man, and later that he had followed them for ten days, were now divided, or rather graded, in conviction. Jean was sure it was a ghost, Levi divided between spook and wild man, the doctor positive it was the latter, and Martin still in doubt. To be followed was disturbing; the bold night visit to their camp while they were asleep was significant; and now a creature, be it Indian, wild man, or hunter, who journeyed by night and crossed lakes when he should be asleep, was more than merely curious of conduct. This mystery had piqued Martin at first, now it exasperated; and though uncertain what to do or which way to turn to solve it, he had no thought of being driven

out of the woods, or even turning aside. He had planned to remain here on this beautiful lake a few days, and now that this mysterious night prowler was there also, he resolved to stand his ground and hunt him out if possible. The creature had apparently gone up the tributary stream — why not follow him?

But Dr. Sol thought otherwise.

"I've had enough of him," was his positive response when Martin proposed they ascend this stream on a searching trip, "and some to spare. I dare not set foot in the woods alone; he drives me away from fishing, and I can't sleep nights. I don't see the good of chasing a bloodthirsty savage who decorates his feet with panther's claws, and who may want our scalps. I've a notion he'd try for one if he caught one of us alone."

Then Martin laughed.

"Well, we'll keep together," he said, "and, for that matter, four men with two rifles need not fear even a wild man."

"Would you shoot him if you got the chance?" returned the doctor, feeling he had the better of the argument.

"Why, yes, in self-defence, of course, not otherwise."

Martin, as leader of the trip, naturally carried his point, but when the canoes were loaded and they started up this stream, it was noticeable that the doctor and Jean, in their craft, kept close to Martin, and not once during all that day's journey did they drop two rods astern.

For the first few miles the stream wound, black and without current, beneath a canopy of firs, the low banks completely hid by undergrowth. Now and then a mink or muskrat was seen crossing just ahead, and once an otter, surprised on a half-submerged log, dived in with a splash that sounded unduly loud. Then a wide stretch of impassable swamp was entered, with here and there a dead spruce rising tall and spectral; beyond this the valley narrowed and banks grew high and rock-walled. Here, too, the stream showed the first sign of current, and the low murmur of an occasional, though invisible rill, gave some relief.

And here it must be stated that in all the wide world there is no sound so sweet as

the music of a brooklet heard in the sombre silence of a wilderness. A bobolink circling over a meadow utters a note of wondrous sweetness, but not to compare with the melodious tinkle of a faint, forest-hidden rill.

To Martin and the doctor it gave keen pleasure, for the unbroken silence of forest solitudes, endured for hours, becomes oppressive. Up to this time, also, no sign of what they were in quest of had been found—no queer tracks on muddy banks, no broken twigs or leaves floating down, no sounds of ill omen, or aught else of suspicious nature. And when noon came, and they landed to crawl up on a high bank and cook dinner, it seemed as if the doctor's theory of a wild-geese chase was likely to prove correct. But now a clew came to them, though one that never would have been noticed except by a woodsman of Levi's keenness. He had gone a little higher up on the bank to break dry twigs from the trunk of a fir tree, when suddenly he paused, elevated his nose, and sniffed.

"I smell smoke," he said, "'n' birch-bark smoke, too."

The next moment he started to climb the tree and halted not until well up toward the top.

"Thar's an opening, 'n' a little lake ahead," he added, returning to earth.

The information was a trifle, but it was something of value, and when the hastily cooked meal was eaten, they pushed on, and now the stream, which had grown smaller, seemed likely to lose itself in another swamp. It was now a mere network of narrow leads without current, twisting among bogs of dry sedge and half hidden beneath alders. First one was tried, then another, and even Levi was getting discouraged, when an opening showed ahead in the tangle, and soon they emerged into a placid little lake.

It was scarce a half mile in diameter, nearly round, and swamp bordered for three-quarters of its circumference. To the right of where they entered, and on its north side, the shore was high and thickly grown with spruce, and here also was a bit of sandy beach. Without a word of comment, Levi turned his canoe toward this, and side by side the two little craft drew near, to halt suddenly when within a few rods,

for there on the bank and beside a narrow path lay a birch canoe, bottom up!


And well they might halt to see that tangible evidence of human existence, so far from civilization and so absolutely hid in the wilderness.

Then the two men looked at each other, while both canoes, as if sharing their feelings, drew close together. The doctor was first to speak.

"Can it be he?" he whispered. Martin shook his head, looking and listening. The question now was not so much whether "he" was lurking in the thicket back of the canoe, as how he would be apt to receive callers.

The canoe looked harmless — an old-fashioned one of birch bark and not the later kind made of canvas. It was long, narrow, and shallow, patched in many places and must have had many years of service.

We hesitate about landing on unknown shores, and Martin now experienced this feeling; but at last he motioned to Levi, and as his canoe grounded on the sandy beach, Martin stepped out with rifle in hand and led the way up the narrow path. And very slowly those four, in single file, advanced. The path



wound around, ascending a low hill, thick grown with spruce at its base, then white birch on top, and beyond those soon appeared an opening, and facing it a log-cabin half hidden under green vines. A smaller one stood back of it. The opening bristled with blackened stumps, a fence of birch stakes driven into the earth and bound with bark withes, surrounded cabins and cleared space, and in this rude garden spot potatoes, beans, and corn, were just growing green. No occupant of the cabin was visible, its door was closed, and as the now astonished party drew near, a dozen or more red squirrels were observed, perched on the cabin or frisking about it, scolding and chattering. One bolder than the rest advanced to meet the visitors with evident delight. It was such a peaceful scene, and the squirrels added such a touch of nature to the wild-wood home, all fear of grizzly faced wild men vanished. If this was the lair of one, he certainly must be poetic of nature and therefore harmless.

Martin knocked on the door, but received no response, then lifted the latch, opened it a little way and glanced in. The interior was neat, and

odorous with fir boughs, a few dishes were piled on a shelf-like table, two stools of split slabs stood near a small stove in one corner, and on the bunk lay the skins of two lucivees and a deer, while others hung from the log walls. A few steel traps also hung from chains, and as if to add a welcome to the now surprised callers, while they looked, a squirrel suddenly appeared at the one little window, now open, sat upright and began to chatter.

A faint smell of smoke, mingling with the balsam odor, showed the cabin to have been recently occupied. On a bench outside the door lay a short broom made of twigs. The smaller cabin contained wood cut and split and a pile of chips in front — all bespoke this lone hut to be a human habitation.

But where was its owner, and what manner of man must he be, content to live thus buried in this wilderness?

Then the four men, like children, began a tour of investigation, and every trifle held interest. An axe that sadly needed grinding, with a helve of white birch, a pail deftly fashioned out of birch bark, a hoe that hung from a cranny be-

tween the logs, and even the vines climbing the log walls and growing green over the pole and bark-thatched roof, were examined. In one corner of the garden a long, narrow bed was green with plants that might bear flowers later, a row of bending and broken-down stalks along the fence, with broad heads picked clean of seeds, showed where sunflowers had grown the previous year, and as all this domestic and home-making evidence was noted, it seemed more and more certain that the wearer of moccasins, with panther's claws, was not the occupant of this wild-wood home.

But who was he?

And as if in answer to this query, and just as the visitors were grouped in front of the hut, an old man, tall, gaunt, with tangled white hair and long beard, suddenly appeared from one side of the cabin.

He was coatless, hatless, and barefoot; a gray shirt patched in many places and trousers more so were his only dress; and, as he halted, looking first at one and then at another of the group with wide-open, solemn eyes, his arms hung limp and motionless.

CHAPTER IX

THE HERMIT

"How do you do, sir?" said Martin, pleasantly, but with inward trepidation. "My friend and myself and our guides have just landed here and made bold to call."

It was a civil speech and all true, but it brought no response. Instead, this Rip-Van-Winkle-like man looked again at one and then another of the four with his big round eyes, but uttered no word.

"I hope we are not intruding," continued Martin; "we certainly didn't mean to, but it was curious to find a human dwelling here."

Then this queer old man spoke.

"What do you want," he asked, in a not unkind voice, "are you hungry?"

It was like the first thought of a savage, or perhaps, of all wild animals.

"Oh, no," answered Martin, "we happened

to see your canoe on the bank, and landed out of curiosity. Then we followed the path and found your cabin. We had no intention of intruding, and hope we are not."

It was all that could be said, but it had no effect upon this Nick o' the Woods, for he made no reply, but turned and entered his cabin, closing the door after him.

"Well, I call that cool," muttered the doctor, while Martin, decidedly taken aback, looked at Levi.

"Guess we ain't welcome," he said again, glancing at the closed door, "and had best go." It was seemingly all that was left, and Martin, more astonished than ever, turned and led the way back to the canoes. "I've had cold shoulder before," he said, when well away, "but none quite like this. Why, the man must be demented."

"He certainly isn't fond of society," responded the doctor, and then, as if with common impulse, or perhaps because suspense had ended, both began to laugh softly. But another and less humorous side to the situation was made pertinent by the sun, now

vanishing into the wilderness—where to find a camp site. To camp where they were, and so near this apparently insane hermit, was not, perhaps, wise, and yet curiosity to find out more about him held them.

“I’m not going to give up this way,” asserted Martin, at last, after a brief discussion, “he’s certainly harmless, and I’m going to try him again. Of one thing I’m satisfied—he isn’t our wild man.”

“I don’t want to meet him alone in the woods after dark, though,” responded the doctor.

But night was near, twilight already falling, and in a little cove, just around from the landing, they pushed ashore again and made a hurried camp.

And now beside the cheerful fire once more, with the dark forest on one side, the little lake in front and the apparently half-insane and altogether mysterious old hermit not a hundred rods away, they discussed him thoroughly as might be expected.

As every detail of his home had been of interest, so now was he, as well as those trifles.

In the busy world one man is so like hundreds of others in garb, speech, habit, and thought, he ceases to be of even passing interest. He may be neat or slovenly, handsome or homely, bright or stupid, brave or cowardly, or any one of the many extremes that make up human nature—no matter. He is but one grain of sand among millions just like him, and we care not even what his name may be. But to Martin and the little doctor, still keenly alive to the mystery that had pursued them for many days, and now coming upon another, as great if less dread, it absorbed all thought, or, in the vernacular, it “kept them guessing.” And for reason.

The hermit, for such he must be called, was no different in dress and appearance than any man of his age would be who had turned his back upon humanity for many years, his habitation as good as such unaided would be likely to erect—in fact, better cared for and with more of refinement about it than one would naturally expect. But the absorbing question was how and why any human being—much less one who would plant flowers,

tame a squirrel, and even sweep out his abode — would be content to thus dwell in solitude twice one hundred miles from a human dwelling. It was unaccountable, and the longer Martin and the doctor discussed it, the more so it seemed.

And then, when the crackling fire had grown silent and they paused in the chat to watch the moon, round and red, creep in sight over the tree-tops, adown through the still night air, from the hermit's hut, came the low, soft twanging of a jews'-harp very faintly; yet so perfect was the stillness, even the melody that unique player rendered could be distinguished, and "Way down upon the Suwanee River," whispered through the forest over and over again. Then came others of the same sad refrain, to end at last with the saddest of all, "Home, Sweet Home."

In silent astonishment now Martin and the doctor sat listening until the lowly, pitiful playing ceased, and then looked at each other.

A new and still more unaccountable and pathetic element of mystery had been added



"THEY HAVE SOULS, SAME AS YOU AND I"—Page 85

to this hermit's character. That he tamed squirrels was natural enough; that he cared for flowers was surprising; but to find he had a soul attuned to melody was astonishing.

And he was content to live thus alone, buried in a pathless wilderness, year after year?

It was past all comprehension.

When morning came, Martin decided that he alone might possibly obtain some consideration from this queer hermit, at least to the extent of replies to a few questions, and armed with a can of condensed milk and two or three cans of fruit as peace offerings, he made him a call. How he succeeded can best be told in his own words.

"I found him on his knees," he reported upon his return, "but he was not praying — merely pulling weeds in the garden. He looked up when I bade him good morning, and then kept on weeding without a word. I asked one or two questions, but obtained no answer, and then a little in doubt whether I had best throw the cans at him and run, or try again, I



"THEY HAVE SOULS, SAME AS YOU AND I"—Page 85

paused. Presently he arose, looked at me with those moon eyes, and asked what I wanted. 'Nothing,' I said, 'except to find out whether you are lonesome, and if you will accept what I've brought.'

"He shook his head, turned away, faced around again, and started for the cabin, and I followed. Here he sat down on the bench, lowered his face into his hands, and for five minutes spoke not a word. I put the cans down beside him, squatted on a stump, and began calling to the squirrels. Then he looked up and smiled, and I never was more grateful for a smile.

"‘They won't hurt you,’ he said, as one came close to me. As squirrels seemed to be the only avenue to his speech, I began to talk of them, and he joined in, telling me how they stole his corn, how they lived with him in winter, and what he fed them. He called them up to him with one peculiar cluck and stroked them, happy as a child. ‘They have souls,’ he said at last, ‘same as you and I, and I'm going to be one of 'em some day.’”

"It was curious and yet pitiful, but I failed

to find out anything about him — how long he'd lived there, or who he was. One or two questions he answered sane enough, others in a vague way, as if he failed to understand them, and some he ignored entirely. When I arose to go, he arose also, and then some sudden impulse led me to offer my hand. He took it naturally enough, and we shook with a warm clasp.


“‘Good-by,’ I said, and he said, ‘Good-by,’ and stood and watched me out of sight. He is sane, and yet he isn't, or rather, he is almost childlike, and absolutely harmless.”

“He must have some sense and intelligence, or he'd starve here,” said the doctor, when Martin finished his story. “No imbecile or semi-lunatic could secure food and keep from freezing winters.”

And this medical opinion, as it may be called, fairly covered the case, though in no wise explaining the mystery. Neither did Martin make further attempt to solve it. It may have been from a sense of pity for this half-demented old man, whose sole joy was the friendship of squirrels, for Martin and the

doctor left the lake that day, and the hermit to his solitude, as well.

No more queer footprints were found, however, and the doctor grew less nervous as they journeyed through the wilderness. But the hermit's face, his long white beard and tangled hair, his moon eyes, his tame squirrels, and all that made him mysterious, formed the main subject discussed around each evening's camp-fire. Though not a ghost, yet he followed them even to the border of the wilderness, a pathetic, mysterious, and altogether fascinating memory.



CHAPTER X

GREENVALE

IT was a brook, or rather three brooks, that gave birth to Greenvale. One, the largest, known as the Mizzy (originally Misery stream) came from, no one knew where, up between two ranges of mountains and out of a five-mile-long morass, rightly called Misery Swamp. For many miles the Mizzy twisted and turned between high wooded banks, diving under overhanging and moss-covered rock walls, down through deep intervalles canopied with thick hemlock and fir, keeping always in shadow, as if ashamed of its origin, till at last it leaped into freedom and sunlight over a low ledge at the head of an oval valley. Here it was joined by two smaller streams, one called Fall Brook, laughing down a narrow gorge in the mountain, active, pure, and fearless, as becomes a well-ordered brook;


the other known as the Ox Bow, and of a similar tenor, coming from the opposite range of low mountains between which lies the valley now partially occupied by Greenvale.

At the head of this, ever so many years ago, an enterprising pioneer named Asa Curtis built a sawmill, taking his power through a flume out of the ready-at-hand falls of the Mizzy, and floating his logs down that stream at spring-freshet time. Gradually others joined him, until a half-dozen houses were grouped near the junction of the three streams, and the spot became known as The Forks. Then others came, clearing up the fertile valley below and erecting houses. A grist-mill and dam were built just above the mouth of Fall Brook, and following these natural adjuncts of civilization came a small log schoolhouse, and later a little church in the valley below. A semi-weekly stage line was established to a larger village twenty miles further down the Mizzy, and where it joined a river, which service was finally increased to a daily one. A tavern with a capacious open fireplace in its office and bar-room combined, was built;

one, two, and finally three stores were started, and in place of "The Forks," the village name was changed to Greenvale.

In the meantime the Revolution had been fought, the village cemetery had grown to ample proportions, Asa Curtis had passed on, his son Jotham, inheriting the saw and grist mill, had become old, and as gray as the flour that daily settled upon him, until he, too, was laid away in the quiet part of the village, willing the two mills, his lands, and ever so many acres of forest, together with the capacious house he had built at the head of the valley, to his two sons, David and Amzi, with the queerest kind of a provision. There was to be no division, but the property must be shared in common; neither could sell a foot of land while the other lived, and the survivor should inherit all. Both were to occupy the dwelling, taking care of their mother while she lived. David, the elder, was to manage the saw and Amzi the grist mill. As might be expected, tying two men together in such a manner was sure to produce discord, and it did. Then, to make an unhappy situation

worse, the two brothers were diametrically opposite in temper and disposition. David was close-fisted to the verge of meanness, narrow-minded, conceited, self-willed, and bigoted in his religious opinions; while Amzi—free-hearted, kindly natured, easy-going, knew not the value of money, nor cared—a dreamer who loved nature, and was totally indifferent to the rigid Calvinism that constituted Greenvale's religion. He would rather raise flowers than corn, go fishing than work, and liked to spend his Sundays in the woods better than in church. In due course he married, though his brother never did, and after a year built a small house near the sawmill, and, with his young wife, left the paternal abode. By this time a feud had started between the two brothers, so bitter that they were not on speaking terms. Then a child—a girl—was born to Amzi. A freshet destroyed the dam above his mill, and David refused to rebuild it, though begged to do so by the neighbors, who knew the situation. Amzi got into debt and discouraged, and then to crown troubles, his wife sickened and died. He grew more



morose and despondent, was often absent in the woods all day, until one June morning the little girl, Angeline, woke up to find herself alone in the house.

Her father had taken his gun, a few of his clothes, and had left for parts unknown.

Then the girl, old enough to know the bitter feeling that existed between her father and uncle, took refuge with her mother's older sister, a widow living farther down the valley, and the little house by the mill was closed; and for many days and weeks the entire village waited and watched for the missing man's return, but in vain.

Mrs. Comfort Day, or Aunt Comfort, to whom the child had flown, was advised to take legal action, but refused. "The Lord's wrath 'll overtake him some day," she said, "'n' while we're waitin', I'll take care o' Angie."

She adopted the girl, rearing her as her own; and so, to all intents and purposes, the heritage of Amzi reverted to David.

But it carried a curse, for a sense of justice, beyond the power of foolish wills or law, existed in that simple village, and all consid-

ered David Curtis responsible for the strange disappearance of his brother. In time he rebuilt the dam, for grist must be ground, attended to his sawing, went regularly to church, as usual, grew more exacting, avaricious, and mean than ever, if that were possible; refused to pay the debts Amzi had incurred, held converse with but few, and that solely on business, and seemed to defy the tide of public opinion which he knew was setting against him.

When his mother, about the only friend left him in the village, died, an old negress was imported to keep house for him; and if lack of social recognition and probable gnawing of conscience could be considered as wrath of God, Aunt Comfort's benediction seemed likely of fulfilment.

He was still a rich man, however; the Rev. Eleazer Jones still extended the brotherly hand to him; he was ever ready to contribute liberally to the church as if that would buy him absolution; a few sycophants fawned upon him, hoping for return, and so his life was not entirely useless.

In the meantime Greenvale slowly increased in size; the falls of the Mizzy shouted in the spring and murmured in summer; winter evenings found many of the villagers gathered in Captain Tobey's tavern, swapping news and sipping toddy; crops and silos and the cheapest fertilizers were here discussed; the village was divided into districts, and each district was furnished with a more modern and framed schoolhouse, and Angie Curtis, now grown to young womanhood, was installed as teacher in one of them.

A new orthodox church, fitted with a tall spire, a larger bell, and also a mortgage, had been erected; another and smaller, a Unitarian church, also arose, flourished meagrely for two years and then closed, also in debt. Solomon Finch, a quick-witted though under-sized young man, who had gone away to study medicine, returned to dispense pills, paregoric, and plausibilities to Greenvaleites; a village debating society started, and the need of paved sidewalks, a system of sewers, a water-supply, and an academy discussed. An annual town-meeting was held, where the momentous ques-

tions of who should be first selectman, supervisor of road making, pound-keeper, hog-reeve, field-drivers, and school committee men, were settled; and more than all this in importance, a railroad had crept up to within twenty miles of Greenvale, with promise of extension to it in the near future.

All this is but a series of marginal notes showing Greenvale's evolution from The Forks, and when Dr. Sol deserted his patients for the first time since he began practice, and went away for an outing with Martin Frisbie, an old schoolmate, the village was as prosperous as one so far from a railroad could be.

CHAPTER XI

AUNT COMFORT'S ASYLUM

"NEZER! Nezer!" called Aunt Comfort, from the kitchen door that June Sunday morning, but no answer came. "I declare I never see the beat o' that boy," she muttered, returning to the sitting room, "he's never 'round 'ceptin' meal times, 'n' then he's allus under foot."

"What is it, auntie," inquired a younger lady, dressed in gray cashmere, and drawing on a well-worn glove, "anything I can do for you?"

"I want a sprig o' fennel and a bunch o' them laylocks to put on the pulpit, 'n' the last bell 'll be ringin' in a minute," the elder one responded in a "flustered" tone, while glancing into a small, gilt-framed mirror.

Without a word Angie gathered her skirts up, barely showing trim ankles, and, tripping

into the garden, soon returned with a cluster of fennel still moist with dew. Then, stepping out of the front door, she broke long twigs of lilac blossoms from the two luxuriant bushes flanking the porch.

"I'll go on ahead, auntie," she said, placing her fragrant bouquet on the stone step while she drew on the other glove, "and you and Hannah can come when she is ready."

Angie had always "gone ahead" in Aunt Comfort's home, ever since she had reached the close of school days. And now, a little past "old maid's corner," but not looking it, she ruled the household.

It was an odd collection, too, for Aunt Comfort, large of heart as person, had, in the sixties, contributed husband and only son to the cause of freedom, and to console herself in part had established a "sort o' 'sylum for the homeless," as Greenvale would put it. First came Hannah Pettibone, a hopeless spinster, so angular of temper and features that no one but Aunt Comfort would have her around. Then Angie, a tot of six, who one morning had awakened to complete orphanhood and desertion in the house

near the mill, and scared, hungry, and in tears, had run to her aunt's with her tale of woe and the first news of her father's disappearance. After Angie came Hans, an import, who walked barefoot into Greenvale one hot summer day, his possessions tied in a red bandanna, and he unable to speak a word of English.

It mattered not, however, for as "Aunt Lorena" Thorp phrased it, "If a tramp was lookin' for a hum, he'd find Aunt Comfort's door open."

Her last addition to this motley collection was Ebenezer Talmage, or "Nezer," whose father had been sent to jail for stealing, and whose mother, discouraged by poverty and a cough, had gone hence, leaving him a town charge.

As was customary in Greenvale, Nezer was then "bound out" to the highest bidder. That is, some landowner gave a bond for the boy's maintenance, agreeing to allow him so many month's schooling until he reached the age of fourteen, and, in lieu thereof, to receive his labor until of age. In this case David Curtis became Nezer's proprietor, but as David's table-board was notorious for its "thinness," the hun-


gry boy was soon driven to secret visits pantryward, to end in discovery, a whipping, and a bread-and-water diet for three days.

But Nezer was not the boy to endure this for long, and one cold winter morn Aunt Comfort found him half starved, at her back door, crying and begging for food.

How her motherly heart opened, how she warmed and fed him beside the kitchen stove ; how he pleaded to remain, willing to work and sleep in the barn ; and how she, with misgivings as to "the law on 't," finally consented, is numbered with her many Good Samaritan acts.

"It's a burnin' shame to treat a poor orphan that way," was her comment, "'n' if David Curtis wants him back, let him come 'n' fetch him. If he does, he'll git a piece o' my mind."

But David made no effort to reclaim Nezer, and as no one else cared what became of him, Aunt Comfort added him to her assortment of unfortunates, and set about bringing him up according to her light. He was a hard problem to solve, however, for once fed and warmed, his sole ambition was mischief of the most diabolical kind. He shod Aunt Comfort's cat with



clam-shells, fastened by grafting-wax, and, with a fish-line for halter, gave that unhappy cat her first lesson in skating on the mill-pond. It was joy supreme to Nezer, while he watched his victim humping, yowling, and vainly clawing the smooth ice, as the wind drew her across, only to be dragged back and repeat the exercise. When early spring came, he found a nest of black snakes, still dormant, and putting them in a bag, took them to Angie's school, where he was a pupil, and, slyly tucking them under the Franklin stove, awaited developments, which came in due time, and resulted in every girl, including Angie, seeking safety on top of benches and desks and screaming with delirious fear, while the big boys enjoyed a snake-killing bee.

Nezer's star act came later, however, when he caught and placed a large eel in Hannah's bed one night, and as that spinster felt the cold creature squirming around her attenuated legs, she paused not at all until she landed at the foot of the back stairs with a broken arm, besides serious injury to her feelings.

Of course Nezer and Aunt Comfort held discussions over the subjects of snakes and eels,

during which a handful of wiry apple sprouts were the convincing argument. They had an enlivening effect on Nezer's bare legs, but failed in moral influence, for when bumblebees came it occurred to him that Hans, always slow and phlegmatic, would most likely be livened up some by "bumbles." To Nezer it seemed a happy thought, and he accordingly trapped a few of those insects in a jar, and deftly inserted it between the sheets of Han's bed late one night. That stolid boy was never before known to hurry much in getting out, but this time he did, and without waiting for a call.

There was no end to the pranks Nezer cut up at home, around the village, or at school, which he kept in an uproar most of the time, until, no matter what happened, it became a foregone conclusion, "Nezer did it."

Of course Aunt Comfort, in her desire to bring Nezer up in the way he should be, provided a new suit with brass buttons and collar pinned to the roundabout, and bow of black silk from a remnant of an old dress, and, thus arrayed, took him to church. But wearing this uncomfortable raiment, and sitting two hours in

a high-backed pew, while the birds were singing in the trees outside, and trout might be caught, was dire punishment to Nezer, and when breakfast and chores were over Sunday mornings, his red hair and freckled face were usually missing.

Angie, however, was the bright particular star in Aunt Comfort's asylum, and from the day she entered it, barefoot and in tears, until now, — well developed and well poised, — she was at once the life, light, and guiding spirit of the household, and the idol of her aunt's heart. She planned the style and made most of Aunt Comfort's and Hannah's dresses, trimmed their best "bunnits," and as the asylum's income depended upon a few acres tilled by hired help, together with two cows and a flock of poultry, as soon as she was old enough she had applied for and obtained a chance to teach in one of the outlying district schools a mile from the village.

She also, by rare economy, added a little to the home furnishing, and replaced the old-fashioned melodeon in the parlor with a modern piano, and during many a lonely evening taught

herself to play. Like most country girls, of whom she was a fair type, she became self-helpful and self-reliant at an early age.

While Angie was the light of the home, Aunt Comfort may be called its statue of Faith, Hope, and Charity combined. Trouble, poverty, and self-denial had been her portion for many years; she lived and worked almost solely for others without complaint, and, except for Angie, would not have gratified herself with a new dress or "bunnit" once in five years. She saw only the best side of all; if they failed to do right, it was from lack of knowledge rather than intention. Only kindly words ever fell from her lips (except in one case, and that well merited), and though urged to do so by Squire Phinney, she flatly refused even to demand from David Curtis Angie's rights and inheritance.

"Let him keep it if he wants to," she said; "he won't be the happier for 't in the long run, 'n' soon or late the Lord 'll see justice sarved."

In fact, this ingrained faith that in due time the Lord would right all wrongs, was the keynote of her character. David Curtis was, as all Greenvale knew, a pious hypocrite, a grasping

miser, willing to rob even his orphaned niece of her heritage, as he had, and yet Aunt Comfort still believed that he would yet be made to repent.

Her home was also as capacious as her benevolence, an ancestral inheritance, brown and moss covered. It stood well back from the village street, with vine-covered porch flanked by lilacs, two oval panes over the front door, giant maples, scarred by countless auger holes, shaded the deep dooryard whose picket fence leaned zig-zag and gray, and where peonies, sweet-williams, and hollyhocks grew.

Inside the house was even more antique, with angular, haircloth furniture and brass fire-dogs in the parlor, lithographs of George Washington and Perry's victory on the walls, and green and gold shades, never raised except on state occasions. In the sitting room, more cheerful, with a bright rag carpet and chintz-covered settle, stood a tall clock of solemn tick, while four-posters, girded with cords, and wooden chairs painted blue, stood in the spacious chambers. These never knew carpets, and the floor of the best one was also painted blue.

This, on cold winter nights, contained countless shivers and chills as well.

The garret was always odorous with sassafras, pennyroyal, and peppermint, for Aunt Comfort believed in "arbs"; and big and little spinning-wheels gathered dust under the rafters, from which in winter depended well-browned hams and links of sausage.

A vein of pathos as well as benevolence ran through Aunt Comfort's life, for in the best chamber closet hung a faded blue blouse, cap, sword, and belt. They were the sole relics of her husband, Captain Day, returned to her by a comrade of his on the field of Gettysburg. The blouse was torn and blood-stained, the sword rusty, the belt mildewed, but all the wealth of the Indies could not have bought them from Aunt Comfort.

Once a year, and always on the tenth of May, — her wedding-day, — she went to that closet alone, and, with tear-dimmed eyes, dusted them carefully, put them back, and, locking them in and her own sorrow with them, resumed her patient, hopeful, helpful life.

CHAPTER XII

GREENVALE IS DISTURBED

DR. SOL's return to Greenvale was an event in the annals of that quiet village. For fifteen years he had traversed his daily rounds, feeling pulses, prescribing pills, and how the old ladies with their "janders," and old men with lumbago got along without him for a month was a marvel. But none died, and though not flattering to him none were the worse off. Naturally the story of his wonderful adventures in the wilderness, the wild man, the lone cabin with its bell signal, and the hermit, made an exciting tale which was listened to with open-mouthed wonder by all. Martin Frisbie's possible return, rich, and likely to abide in Greenvale, was also of keen interest, and for a week this and the doctor's experiences formed the sole topic of conversation in every home. His subsequent call at Aunt Comfort's, where he and his fat wife "drapped in" about once a week, was

also an event, and for three hours he talked steadily. Nezer was the most interested listener, however, and he sat in one corner, so excited that he hardly breathed. He had read a few dime novels, but this was the real thing, and Dr. Sol a hero beyond compare. For days and weeks after Nezer lived over that marvelous tale again and again, each time counting the years that must elapse ere he could obtain a gun and go into the wilderness and live as that old hermit did. Aunt Comfort and the rest were also charmed listeners, and when the doctor came to Martin's probable return to Greenvale, Angie was the most interested of all, and not entirely pleased with it. He had been her youthful knight-errant in school days, and later at parties, husking-bees, and the like; he had taught her the lesson of first love and then left her abruptly, and she was not of the fibre that soon forgot. She cherished no malice; she was now mature enough to realize that such early experiences are inevitable and to be laughed over later on, and yet she was not anxious to meet Martin again. She fancied from the doctor's meagre description that he

had grown stout, consequential, and arrogant over his success in life; that he had attained to riches and would insist on informing every one of that fact in all manner of ways. She hated bumptious men at sight, and was sure he would now prove to be one. Once he was her girlish ideal, now he would inevitably prove irritating. While the voluble doctor was mingling more or less of Martin — his looks, actions, speech, and opinions — into the tale of adventure, Angie, keen and well accustomed to drawing her own conclusions, now formed an opinion of Martin, and one not to his credit. The doctor had liked him — that was to be expected; they both enjoyed wood life, and Martin had paid all expenses, she learned — that was another reason. His return to spend more money in Greenvale would redound to the doctor's credit (still more reason for admiration), and as Dr. Sol talked on and on, Angie became distrustful and more certain that she would rather never meet this old-time admirer again.

Toward the close of the evening, Dr. Sol also indulged in unfortunate raillery.

"I fancy," he said, "that a certain plump

schoolma'am here is the magnet that is drawing Martin to Greenvale, and if she is wise, she will meet him halfway." Then, as Angie made no response, he added: "You were about the only person here in whom he showed much interest, Angie. He inquired how you looked and what you were doing, and when I assured him you had no beau and were most likely waiting for him — well, if we hadn't been following a mysterious wild man, I think he'd have started out of the woods next day."

It was only the doctor's pleasantry, of course, but Angie's eyes snapped.

"I wonder you didn't tell him I had kept a wedding-gown all ready for ten years," she answered, "and would come to the city to meet him."

"Oh, no, he wouldn't expect that," continued the doctor, who never tired of teasing Angie; "but I assured him that I never met you without you mentioned him in some way, and he could pop the question with perfect safety. I think he will, too."

"Oh, of course," rejoined Angie, with spirit, "all men imagine that every woman they look at twice is ready to fall into their arms, espe-

cially those who belong to the medical profession. Of all men blessed with abnormal self-esteem, commend me to a doctor!"

But Dr. Sol never winced. "I'll bet you a wedding-hat against a box of cigars, Angie," he continued, "that you will contrive to go to church alone the first evening he is likely to be there; or if he calls sooner, he will find you with best bib and tucker on."

When the callers had departed, Aunt Comfort addressed her with: "I think, Angie, we'd best set to 'n' make up that figgered muslin you was callatin' for best this summer, 'n' mebbe a couple o' pretty waists. If Martin Frisbie's comin' to visit the doctor, he'll be like to call, 'n' you'll want suthin' cool 'n' becomin' to wear."

"He will see me in my everyday dress or not at all," returned Angie, firmly. "Besides, I don't believe yet he's coming. City men have no use for us country people. We are too slow."

But this was only the beginning to Angie's annoyance, for the next Sunday at church, Aunt Lorey, who was deaf and talked unduly loud, waited for her coming out.

"I hear," she said, loud enough to be heard

across the street, "that your old beau's comin' back. I s'pose you'll be settin' yer cap fer him, won't ye? They say he's got a lot o' money." And Angie felt like smiting Aunt Lorey with her parasol.

It was fortunate, perhaps, that this breeze of gossip and raillery blew over before Martin reached Greenvale; and it must be recorded, also, that Angie changed her mind in one respect, and set about making needed additions to her wardrobe. Whether this was or was not in any respect due to a desire to look well in the eyes of this returning hero, or solely to a fair maid's latent vanity, can be safely left to the sneering critics of the fair sex.

For one thing, she had certainly outgrown the illusion of her youth; Martin was no more to her than any other well-behaved man; and yet, down deep in her heart, was a little craving for revenge. She had suffered like all silly girls, she said to herself, and now if he was returning with the idea of finding her a love-lorn maid awaiting his smile of favor, she would soon disabuse him of that conceit.

And she was capable of it!

CHAPTER XIII

ILLUSION AND REALITY

WHILE Martin had assured the doctor that he intended to return to Greenvale for an indefinite time, it is doubtful whether he would except for two reasons — first, Angie, and second, the mania that all country-born men of Waltonian instincts who drift cityward soon or late have, to retire to the peace of rural life and establish a trout preserve.

In Martin's case it may be asserted that it was the lady, more especially, that was the attraction.

It is a curious phenomenon of love and logic that one may continue for years thinking only of and striving toward one end and aim, and then some trifle may change the current of thought and ambition. With Martin it was the jesting assertion of the doctor that Angie was a love-lorn maiden still, and doubtless wait-

ing for him to claim her. And such is the astonishing vanity of most men in assuming how their early sweethearts are sure to feel, that Martin (no exception) felt that the doctor's jest might perhaps be true. A suspicion soon grows to a certainty, and once Martin began to recall that early episode in his life, the more guilty he felt, and the more sure that he wanted to return and pay court once more to Angie. He could also afford a wife now, and with him all indulgences, from an outing trip into the wilderness to establishing a home, were decided upon from an economic standpoint. It was weeks before he could so shape his business affairs as to leave the city temporarily, and midsummer ere he packed his trunk, and, with an unwieldy bundle of rods, started for Greenvale.

"Fishing in the old brooks will serve as an excuse," he said to himself, but it was to angle for Angie rather than trout.

Little did he realize how many keen disappointments were in store for him, or how most of the charming fancies of his boyhood were to be dispelled.

In the first place, he had neglected to notify Dr. Sol when he was likely to reach Greenvale, and so it happened, when the twenty-mile stage ride ended and that dust-laden vehicle, with Martin as sole passenger, halted at the doctor's just at twilight, no one was there to receive him. Martin paid the rather surly driver who dumped his trunk on the porch and then hurried away, oblivious to what became of, or how fared, his passenger.

Then Martin sat down to think.

He had returned to the home of his boyhood after twelve years' absence, dusty, hungry, tired, and slightly cross, and his only welcome was an empty house and the chance to skirmish for supper at the village tavern.

This he did with not over-satisfying results, and then he wandered up the street. A quietude akin to that of a cemetery now pervaded it, and though occasionally he could see the occupants of a house out on the porch, most of the houses seemed empty. Fireflies twinkled above the broad meadows of the Mizzy, down the valley came the low murmur of its falls, the scent of new-mown hay perfumed the air, and as he

strolled on, somewhat soothed by the evening's stillness and his cigar, he came in sight of Aunt Comfort's. Toward it he had many times before turned his steps on just such summer evenings long ago, and what if Angie should be there now on the vine-hid porch alone and waiting his coming, as she used to then! The thought made his pulses quicken, but as he drew near he halted. The spot had not changed at all. The great maples, now thick with summer foliage, almost hid the house, the faint odor of lilacs and syringas greeted him; the two oval panes over the front door gleamed like two wide-open eyes, but no white-clad girl sat on the porch. Instead, from out the house issued a medley of voices chatting and laughing, quite oblivious of a listener. He did not catch what was said, and did not try, and as he advanced again the tinkling of a piano began, and some one started singing. It sounded like Angie's voice, and then others joined in one of the old songs, well remembered by him. It was "In the Sweet Summer Time, Long Ago," and many a time had he been the sole audience while Angie sang it. And now

once more laughter and voices, two of them certainly masculine and while he halted again in shadow, he heard how —

“In an ivy-covered cottage,
Hidden back by oaken trees,
Lived a little maiden
Blithe and happy as you please.
There upon a low veranda
Every summer eventide,
I sit among the flowers,
Fair Camelia by my side.”

It was all very sweet and charming, and doubtless the young men who were joining Angie in the old-time ballad enjoyed it, but somehow Martin didn't. He wasn't sitting amid flowers with a “sweet Camelia” by his side — and what made it worse, another man was in his old-time place. If Angie had been pining for him all these years, it hadn't affected her spirits to a serious extent. Then, as another burst of low laughter reached him, he moved on.

A little gathering of friends were doubtless enjoying a call at Angie's, and he was not one of them. More than that, it began to dawn upon him that now, upon his return to the

scenes of his youth, he was likely to find himself forgotten. At the head of the street he paused again, looking across the Mizzy to where the home of David Curtis stood. There was no light or laughter here issuing forth, instead the house was silent, solemn, and apparently empty, while the low rumble of the Mizzy falls, now close by, was the only sound. For a moment only Martin paused, his spirits at low tide, and then retraced his steps.

Reaching Aunt Comfort's again, he halted. The callers were still there, voices and laughter still issuing, and the two wide-open eyes over the front door now seemed to glare at him in derision.

A stranger in the village of his youth — there was not one there who thought of his existence!

Even Angie, once all in all to him, was, or had just been, joining her voice with another man's.

Then, as he moved on, how the old memories returned! One by one, like the quick flashing views of a stereopticon, they sped by — the many evenings he had sat on that same porch with Angie, the lingerings at the gate when the moon-

light fell checkered through the maples, the summer evening rides along lonely and shaded roads, the winter nights when the snow gleamed white and the bells jingled, the barn dances when their feet and hearts kept happy time to the music of the fiddle, the huskings, the spelling schools, and always the home-coming to this one sacred dwelling, to repeat the parting again and again, and then to walk — no — float away on air!

And now, when this dream had become only a charming memory of the long ago, he had returned to find her who had inspired it, singing with others and doubtless oblivious to whether he was dead or alive.

It was all the silliest sort of nonsense then, of course, and foolish to try to recall it now; and yet, as Martin did, it seemed that to feel the same boyish happiness and live once more in the same fairy palace built of moonshine and filled with delusion, would be cheap at the cost of all the years that intervened.

When he, somewhat saddened by these by-gones, and not at all sure that his return to Greenvale was wise, reached the doctor's

home, to find it occupied now, the greeting that followed seemed doubly welcome.

"It's all my fault," admitted Martin, in response to Dr. Sol's profuse explanations, "and after all, the hour's stroll gave me a little pleasure, for I passed Aunt Comfort's and heard Angie singing some of the old songs. She has a piano now, I judge."

"Why didn't you call?" queried the doctor, with a laugh; "she knows you're coming, and it wouldn't have surprised her."

But Martin answered not, for to admit the facts would expose him to the doctor's raillery.

Then they sat down to a social chat, the doctor's wife insisting that Martin relate his side of that wonderful trip into the wilderness and the discovery of both wild man and hermit, and after that the doctor recounted changes that had taken place in Greenvale since Martin had left it.

One story more, especially pertinent to this narrative, was told by the doctor, and must be quoted.

"I suppose you remember old David Curtis," he said, "and how he treated his brother Amzi?"

Well, the old miser has almost reached his dotage, and they say his conscience is beginning to trouble him. I've always doubted he had any, but the men who work in his mill and board with him say he imagines the premises have become haunted and hears things at night. He certainly looks more dried up and careworn than ever. Then there is a deal of concern here as to what he will do with his property when he passes on; you know, I suppose, that your old flame Angie is next of kin, and if he makes no will, she inherits all."

"I recall the stories of how he abused his brother," responded Martin, "and Amzi's mysterious disappearance. I used to half expect to find his bones in Misery Swamp some day when I set traps there. Has no trace of him ever been found?"

"No, and I doubt if there ever will be. Old Cy Walker — you remember him — says he met a man in the woods above the falls about ten years ago, who resembled Amzi, and some believe it was he, and that he will return some day."

"And there was no settlement of his estate," put in Martin, as the old story returned to him, "and didn't Angie receive anything finally?"

"Not a penny. David claimed Amzi owed him more than his personal estate was worth, and all realty reverted to him at Amzi's death, so Angie received nothing. Aunt Comfort, as you know, brought her up. There's one curious fact about the matter," added the doctor, after a pause, "and that is, never, since Amzi's disappearance, has David sold a foot of land."

For a few moments Martin pondered on this curious complication in silence. He had, as a boy, heard something about it, but it did not then interest him.

"What about the dower right of Angie's mother?" he asked suddenly; "no will could rob her child of that."

"You must ask Aunt Comfort," responded the doctor, smiling, "and yet, I'd advise you not to. It's a tender subject with her, and never spoken of."

Then other bits of village history were recounted by the doctor, and Squire Phinney,

Aunt Lorey, Parson Jones, old Cy Walker and dozens of others, once well known by Martin, were spoken of.

"I must hunt up old Cy to-morrow," asserted Martin as the talk ended, "and get him to take me fishing. He used to know where all the best holes were."

And thus Martin came in touch once more with Greenvale's quiet life, and when he was shown into the doctor's best front room, it seemed as if his absence had been only months instead of years.

One incident of this first evening — or rather query — kept recurring, even after he sought his pillow: To whom belonged the male voice which joined Angie's in the old songs, and was he a frequent and welcome visitor there?

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER MANY YEARS

If there was one thing Aunt Comfort delighted in more than another, it was "arbs."

Every summer and fall her capacious garret was stocked with them, and great clusters of thoroughwort, hoarhound, boneset, spearmint, pennyroyal, and coltsfoot, duly labelled, were hung up, together with bunches of sarsaparilla, sassafras, burdock, elderberry, and dog-fennel roots, and bags of lobelia beans. These, it may be said, were her great specifics, whether it was Nezer taken with cramps, Hannah with "yaller janders," old Cy with "rheumatis," or any one else Aunt Comfort was privileged to dose.

Every spring, at house-cleaning time, Aunt Comfort threw out the old "arbs" to be replaced by new, and in the fall the roots were also renewed. In fact, her best black silk, always wrapped in a sheet and hung in a closet,

and her best "bunnet" received no more solicitous care than her annual store of "arbs." Neither was her dosing proclivity confined to her own family; but if a neighbor was known to be in the least "ailin'," Aunt Comfort was on hand in no time, and she knew "just what was good for 't."

As may be surmised, Dr. Sol did not relish her encroachments on his calling, but he was a natural-born diplomat, and many a time he would go to Aunt Comfort and ask for a small bunch of boneset or handful of sassafras roots to use later, and then drop them by the roadside. As a result she always praised Dr. Sol, and assured the neighbors he "knew his callin'."

In pursuance of her regular custom when certain "arbs" were ready for gathering, she had, on this pleasant Saturday morning, spent by Martin in fishing, gone with Angie, and Nezer to carry the basket, on an excursion over the hillsides and into the woods overlooking Greenvale, and was just returning.

Nezer, on ahead, halted now and then to shy a stone at a bird or squirrel, Aunt

Comfort was waddling along, and Angie carried an umbrella for a sunshade, when Martin came in sight.

"I vum, I do believe it's Martin Frisbie," exclaimed Aunt Comfort, in a tone of delight; "I heered this mornin' he'd come."

"Well, what of it?" answered Angie, coolly, and secretly nettled at Aunt Comfort's tone; "no one here is likely to drop dead on that account."

The fact is, Angie had heard so much about Martin, how rich he was in comparison to other Greenvaleites and what an event his return to Greenvale was likely to be, in the past two weeks, that she was prepared to dislike him at sight. Dr. Sol, Aunt Comfort, and several of the gossip-loving neighbors had also reminded her of what she wished to forget. Then she also fancied he would be self-conscious of his importance, and deport himself as if he expected the village to bow down before him at sight. She was sure that she would not—in fact, had fully determined that when she did meet him, he would be made to know at once there was one to whom his

coming and wealth were matters of perfect indifference.

Like all her sex she was a little curious, however, and as he drew near, she noted with feminine eyes every detail of dress and manner.

"Why, bless me!" he exclaimed, coming up and removing his hat as he extended his hand, "if this isn't Aunt Comfort, good-natured as ever; and Angie, how are you, too?" And perforce she had to take the hand he offered, though the "How do you do, Mr. Frisbie?" in return was entirely dignified.

"Well," he continued rapidly, "I suppose you heard I arrived last night and spent the evening tramping around to kill time? It was a good joke on me, for I forgot to write the doctor, and he was out."

"I'm very glad to see you," asserted Aunt Comfort, "you look nat'r'l. I knew ye the minute I sot eyes on ye." And she beamed upon him—in fact, she beamed upon every one.

But Angie was silent, quite willing her aunt should do the talking.

"I made an early start for my old favorite trout brook," added Martin, pleasantly, glancing at Angie's impassive face, "and didn't recognize it when I found it, it has grown so small. I presume I'll find lots of other changes."

He came near relating how he had stood for half an hour in front of Aunt Comfort's home and asking Angie if she were not singing, but somehow her reception chilled the impulse. Then, after replying to a few more cordial questions from Aunt Comfort and thanking her for her urgent invitation to call, he once more raised his hat and passed on.

And this was his unromantic meeting again, with her whom he had worshipped when a callow youth, and who was destined to mete out to him more humiliation and heartache than all else in his life before.

"Rather cool," he muttered to himself when out of earshot, "but she hasn't changed much. Fits her dress a little better, but same bright eyes and cherry mouth. Wonder who was singing with her!"

And as he now wandered aimlessly over the old farm, finding, as he expected, dilapidation, neglect, and makeshift everywhere — meadows choked with bushes, fences rotted and rebuilt by felling saplings, ploughs and tools left to rust in fields, barns awry and full of holes, and worst of all, the house brown from lack of paint, with rags for missing window-panes, it made him sick at heart. Then, too, the memories of bygone days, when youth and new ambitions were just becoming motive forces, and Angie in her sweet girlish way was sharing them, returned; and as in his wanderings he came once more to the brook that had been his boyhood delight, it seemed to mock him with its chatter and insist how foolish he had been to expect happiness in wealth-gathering solely.

In some intangible manner, Angie too had conveyed to him the impression that the silliness of her youth was dead and buried forever, and that any reference to it would meet a rebuff. She had said very little, having merely spoken and looked at him in a perfectly courteous and calm manner, her brown

eyes curious only, her rounded cheeks guiltless of extra color, and yet there was a poise and air about her that said louder than words: "You and your coming are nothing to me. Do not seek to recall the foolishness of our childhood by word or act."

This much came to him as he sat by the brook that, like a symbol of life, was forever running away, and when he returned to dinner, he was in a morose mood.

"If it wasn't midsummer," he said to Dr. Sol, "I'd bounce that lazy Bates out of the old house in short order. I've looked the farm over and it makes me sick."

It is likely he would have been in a worse mood had he heard the comment made by Angie after their meeting.

"I think, auntie," she said, "that Mr. Frisbie must have expected all Greenvale would be at the doctor's when he arrived, and he probably wonders why we don't follow him about and condole with him because things have changed. He said he supposed we had heard of his arrival, and we have—at least I have, with repeats and foot-notes. He must

think nobody but himself in the world ever got rich. He ought to wear a card on his coat with 'I am Martin Frisbie, and worth money,' printed on it."

"If you don't cotten to him, Stella Phinney or some other gal will, you can make sure," responded Aunt Comfort, sagely, and in a tone of reprimand. "Young men worth money are skeerce here, 'n' gals ain't all holdin' their noses any higher 'n' need on. You might at least 'a' been civil to him 'n' told him you was glad to see him."

Then Angie laughed. To her Aunt Comfort was as transparent as glass.

There is many a truth uttered in jest, and many a heartache concealed beneath a sarcasm, and Angie's sneer must not be taken as an index of her feelings toward her youthful lover.

She was prepared for and did meet him with polite indifference, but beneath it lay a sense of injustice and a bit of the old-time pain that no one, not even Aunt Comfort, suspected.

CHAPTER XV

BOYHOOD MEMORIES

LIVING over bygones is about as consoling as an epitaph in a cemetery, as Martin learned when he set about a business examination of the old farm. He had returned to Greenvale with a vague idea of remaining there, if Angie had not forgotten, and still smiled upon him; then, if certain possibilities came about, to build a modern house on the site of the old homestead now owned by him, and for amusement to establish a trout preserve. It was all a nebulous plan, and somehow his first evening's experience and later meeting with Angie had partially dispelled that. A few years had wrought great changes—her old fondness for him had vanished, and he feared that he was almost forgotten. It was not pleasant, nor what he had secretly hoped, and yet it seemed a fact.

His early haunts that he now visited for the first time since his return also read him a lesson of change and bitter-sweet memory. There was the old house, so shocking in its rack-and-ruin condition, the woodshed where he used to hide his fish poles and traps, and beside it the old pear tree. The woodshed seemed a mere coop now, and he smiled at sight of that grindstone he used so to abhor. Old memories might be saddening, as they were, but at least he was not likely to be called upon to "turn grin' stun" again until his back seemed broken.

Then came the garden, with its low wall hid by grape-vines, where he, with vexed spirit, had been made to pull pusley, year after year, and always, it seemed, when he wanted to go fishing. Here he had usually dug for angle-worms—a pleasanter occupation; and when midsummer came, how good those crisp green cucumbers used to taste! Beyond was the apple orchard, and, as he entered it again, one tree, to which he had many times been sent to cut sprouts to be used later on, on himself, caught his attention. It was old and

almost dead now, but a few of just such slender whips, as mother had used around his bare legs with such cheering effect, still grew from its trunk. And what a delight it had been, in the mellow autumn, to shake those trees and pick up apples, and when the cart was filled, to ride on it to the cider-mill and "holler" to the patient oxen. And then the cider making! How vividly that picture returned! The old horse walking slowly around pulling the sweep, the many-colored apples disappearing in the hopper, the men-folks heaping dripping pumice on the press, and when the cider began to run, how delicious it tasted through a straw!

Angie used to come here with other girls, on their way from school, and how pretty she used to look in her calico sunbonnet, her hair in one long braid falling in her way as she stooped over to suck cider out of the little rill that ran around the press. Martin recalled how he used to keep a bunch of nice white straws hid away, waiting for her, and when she appeared, his heart used to beat a little faster.

It was all a delightful memory, that apple gathering and cider making, and he always regretted when its season was over.

And now he wandered up to the brook running through the old farm,—the one he was planning to utilize for trout raising,—and as he followed its leaping, laughing course, he paused to look into every eddying pool and at each little cascade. There was one deep hole below the abutments of a wooden road bridge, shaded by a willow, and here he halted longest, for here he had caught his first trout. It was only a little one, yet never since, among the thousands of big ones he had landed from lake or stream, was one that thrilled to his very finger-tips as that one had.

And what a change in the stream itself! Then this pool appeared deep, dark, and dangerous; now he could wade across it with impunity, and the brook seemed a mere rill. Above this it ran through a pasture where laurel grew and where he used to set a box-trap for rabbits. This, also, was good arbutus ground, and over it and along the bordering

woods he and Angie had come many times, gathering those fragrant flowers. The laurel was now in full bloom, and great clusters, some pink, some white, surrounded him; but he was alone, and the happy days when he and she together, and sometimes hand in hand, wandered about here, seemed so long ago. He wondered if she would come here now with him, and if she did, would it seem to either as it did then? And now he recalled the recent first meeting again, and her cool reception, so disappointing, and then the old-time youthful idyl seemed longer ago than ever. Life had swept him, and doubtless her, far beyond the old sweet romance, and like the withered autumn leaves he now found crumbling to dust beside rocks, so were those old-time memories doomed.

But he still followed the brook, whose laughter mocked his mood, until deep in the swamp where he had set traps and snares for partridges, it became lost in a tangle of alders. Then back again, in melancholy frame of mind, he retraced his steps over pasture, meadow, and field, to where the Mizzy flowed deep

and still. This he crossed on an old red bridge, also fraught with tender memories, and passed down the by-road to the schoolhouse, sacred to the memory of "Two Old Cat," "Pump Peterway," kissing-games under an old apple tree with Angie in the ring, and awful fright when examination day and speaking pieces came. It looked the same as then, only worse. More initials were carved on the brown boards, and the surrounding bushes hemmed it in a little closer.

And as Martin paused, looking at it, he wondered if he were the same boy who had come there day after day, creeping slowly in to study and storming out to play. And what would Angie say if she stood beside him now, looking at the empty schoolhouse, with not a dwelling in sight and only the birds singing in the gnarled old apple trees, and the sun shining over all? Would even these old memories recall aught of mutual heart interest, and brush away the cool reserve she had met him with?

He had grown up with her, as it were, then the simple singling out of one another, the

quarrels and make-ups adding fuel, and later the keeping company, the walks home from spelling school and meeting, the flower hunting, summer drives in shady woods, winter sleigh-rides, sparking in Aunt Comfort's parlor, and all the silly nothings, so momentous then. With the ambition of young manhood, he had turned away from all such foolishness, forgetting it in the busy world; then in the stillness of a wilderness camp it had returned with insidious force, almost compelling thought and action, until now, when looking once again into the eyes of her who wrought this old-time spell, they met his without response. Truly, a woman's heart was as transitory as the wind, and first love as short lived as early violets. He almost wished he had not returned to Greenvale, and all his fond illusions were fast vanishing. More than all this, it was evident Angie had outgrown hers, and was quite happy and content without him.

And now as he retraced his steps toward the village after a morning of gloomy memories, it seemed as if fate meant to be kind, for just ahead he espied Angie entering the by-road from a pasture. She wore the same broad sun

hat of the day before, carried a pail, and had evidently been after berries.

With quick steps Martin had almost reached her, when she halted and faced about.

"Why, how you scared me!" she exclaimed, looking relieved.

"I'm sorry," he responded, smiling and raising his hat, "and yet, I'm glad. I've been on a tour over my old haunts, ending at the school-house, and thinking of you."

"You find things changed, I presume," she answered coolly, now herself and ignoring his reference.

"Why, yes, of course. Everything seems to have grown smaller, including the old school-house. That seemed a mere turkey coop. You have been after berries, I see," he added, as she made no reply to this.

"Why, yes," flashing a curious look at him, "country girls always go after berries, rake hay, and drive the cows, and I'm still a country girl, you see."

Martin laughed. "I hear you are also a schoolma'am now," he rejoined, thinking it wise to change the subject; "where do you teach?"

"In the same 'turkey coop' you just visited," she answered, smiling.

"Why, that's where we used to go to school together; that's funny." Then, as she made no response, he continued: "I've been all over the old farm, and up through the laurel pasture where we used to gather arbutus, and back by the old cider-mill. It made me feel like a boy again."

"That was pleasant," she replied in a lack-interest tone; "are you thinking of becoming a farmer again?"

"Hardly," — a little piqued at her coolness; "I've a notion, though, of building a dam on the farm and raising trout. That's been a hobby of mine for many years. Do you enjoy teaching school, Angie?" he asked suddenly, realizing that old memories and his plans failed to interest her.

"Why, yes, until winter comes. It's quite a long walk."

A pause, an inflection, a mere shading of tone will give a keen observer the key to another's feelings, and Martin, as he glanced down at the shapely, calico-clad girl beside him, read her

thoughts, and saw her life as it was in an instant. They had been as youthful lovers, all in all to one another, parting with fond promises, — he apparently to forget his, and she to continue her simple life as pure and open as the brook he had that day followed. And now on his return, she would not, even by allusion to old associations, admit they had ever been aught to one another. Had she wished to renew the old ties, or awaken his interest again, he had given her ample chance, and yet she ignored it. It was pride of the most indomitable sort, and while it hurt, he felt like taking off his hat to it. Then, as the history of her life, as related by Dr. Sol, returned to him on the instant, — her heritage kept from her, a dependent on Aunt Comfort and obliged to walk a mile to and from that by-road schoolhouse each day, year after year, to earn a pittance, — the pathos of it all smote him. He could buy half the village and have money left, and she whom he had many times held close in his arms, and to whom he had whispered loving words, was walking beside him gowned in faded calico and wearing worn-out shoes.

Worse than that, from his viewpoint, now that he had returned, anxious to atone for years of neglect and renew the old lovership, she would not even admit that it ever existed.

"Angie," he said, after a long pause, "I came near calling on you the evening I arrived. The doctor was out and I walked up to your house, but heard singing, and concluded you had callers."

"Well, why didn't you," she answered, smiling; "you are not bashful, are you?"

"No, but I didn't feel like intruding. I stood under the maples, however, and enjoyed your singing a few moments."

But even this brought no response, and fully conscious now that she intended to avoid all reference to old memories, he began speaking of his plans for trout raising.

"Won't you come in?" she asked pleasantly, when the house was reached; "Aunt Comfort will be glad to see you."

"No, thank you," he answered in the same tone, "not now." And, raising his hat, he turned away.

CHAPTER XVI

SUNDAY IN GREENVALE

ORIGINALLY, a strict observance of the Lord's Day began in Greenvale at sundown Saturday, and became a twenty-four hours of penance. No cooking was supposed to be done, no chores except imperative ones, long prayers were repeated night and morning by the heads of the families, two lengthy sermons by the orthodox parson, each extending to "seventeenthly," then to "finally," and "in conclusion," occupied most of the day. To the young it was a long, solemn period of gloom from sun to sun, and if a boy was detected near a brook, or caught cracking a nut, merciless punishment followed.

When the first bell sounded at nine o'clock, all (unless sick) were supposed to get ready, those at a distance came in all manner of

conveyances, left lined up in the long row of sheds back of the church. At ten o'clock the second bell was rung, when all were expected to be in their seats and a penitent frame of mind.

If a late-arriving farmer entered, tiptoeing down the aisle in tallowed, but squeaking boots, all turned, frowning at him, and when the last note of the tolling bell died away and the parson arose in the tall pulpit, the solemnity was so dense that it could be felt.

Then came a short prayer, a hymn read in full but abbreviated a little by "Please omit the third and fifth stanzas," and droned in long metre by the assembled sufferers, and after that the long prayer in which the worthy parson not only recited what the Lord's plans were, but his theories in reference to them, together with a surfeit of advice. At last "Amen" was reached and then came a general clearing of throats.

At this juncture the old ladies usually nibbled fennel or flagroot.

Of the sermon that followed, also in long metre, the least said the better. Few under-

stood it as anything pertinent to their daily lives or followed it beyond "tenthly," and when the inevitable collection, closing hymn, and benediction ended the two hours of gloom, the young people at least were glad to escape.

The congregation had been assured and proof offered that God created humanity expecting and intending to damn all who did not believe in the true and only orthodox creed; that all other creeds were heresies and their followers sure to flounder in burning brimstone; that unbaptized babes, and all nations that were heathen, would eventually be relegated to the fiery furnace and the worm that never dies; and, worse than that, told in solemn and sepulchral tones that wife, child, father or mother, brother or sister, who did not come into this, the only true fold, and accept this, the only true gospel and salvation, would also be damned forever.

Later, another creed known as Unitarian secured a small following in Greenvale, who erected a modest church which flourished meagrely a few years and then disbanded in debt. In time also the rigid Calvinism and strict

Sunday observance slowly merged into a growing indifference. Many of the younger generation failed of conversion, and when Martin Frisbie accompanied Dr. Sol and his wife to the sanctuary the first Sunday after his return, not more than half who gathered there were members.

As he expected, Martin was stared at slyly, and when services were over, a few of the elderly ones halted in the porch to greet him, for Dr. Sol had spread the news that he was now quite rich and might take up his residence in Greenvale. Aunt Comfort was one of these, but Angie merely bowed and walked on with Hannah. As their path was the same, Martin had half expected the two families would walk homeward together and thus give him a chance to chat with Angie; but it did not occur. When the greetings were over, however, he walked away with Aunt Comfort.

When evening came, Martin was in somewhat of a quandary. He had met Angie three times, and on each occasion she had shown no more than ordinary courtesy and no vestige of any deeper feeling. Then to walk on ahead

of the rest, as she had that morning, seemed almost a snub.

But a certain dogged determination inherent in him conquered indecision, and when the evening bell called and she appeared, he boldly advanced and in the most polite manner offered his company churchward.

Now it was a well-understood social custom in Greenvale that, when a young couple of marriageable age walked to church together, they were engaged, or willing to be so considered, and hence, when Martin walked up the aisle that evening and faced about to let Angie enter the pew first, every eye in the church was upon them and her face was very red. Full well she knew what all were thinking and what a tempest of gossip would follow. It did not occur to Martin, however, until service was over, and as he opened the hymn-book, found the places and stood up, he was quite proud of himself. But on the way home a species of frost seemed to fall upon Angie and her "Won't you come in?" when the gate was reached, was so chilly he came near refusing it. The old custom had recurred to him by this

time, however, and he felt he owed her an apology. But it must be delayed, for Aunt Comfort and Hannah sat upon the porch, and for an hour the four chatted of commonplaces and the evening, which was one worth talking about, for the moon's full light glowed in the maples and fell checkered through the latticed, vine-hid porch where they sat, the syringas in the dooryard mingled their odor with the new-mown meadows, and the low murmur of the Mizzy falls whispered in the balmy air—an evening when Cupid should be abroad.

But Angie was decidedly out of harmony with it. She would not have gone to church had she dreamed that Martin would have intruded his company upon her. She could not refuse it without affront, and thus caught, had gone on to feel herself a spectacle for all eyes and a target later for all tongues, and this, in the face of her determined effort so far, to avoid his attentions. Something of this came to him by degrees, however, and when they were left alone together, his first words were humble.

"I owe you an apology, Angie," he said,

quite meekly, "and realize I've put my foot in it, to-night; I didn't until I saw that we were stared at, and I hope you will pardon my blunder."

"Oh, it was nothing," responded Angie, quietly, "and no harm has been done." It was the least she could say.

"I've been away so many years," he continued, "I've forgotten Greenvale's social laws, and how they will gossip here. I won't make another such blunder, I assure you." Then, as she made no further response to this, perforce he had to speak of something, and launched into a recital of the incidents of his recent trip with Dr. Sol. It was ancient history to her, but she listened and commented with simulated interest. It was forced, as Martin soon felt, and a gradual sense of his own failure to interest her grew upon him. Beyond that her chilly reception of him upon all occasions, added to the changes he had found in his old haunts, now rendered him gloomy. He had tried his best to be agreeable, he had spoken all the pleasant words he could, pertinent to the occasion; he had shown his desire

to pay her attention, and it all availed not. His return had so far been a disappointment in all respects, and he began to wish that he had kept away from Greenvale.

"Did you ever read the story of Rip Van Winkle, Angie," he asked at last, "and how the old fellow, after sleeping twenty years, returned to his village to find himself dead to all? I never before realized how he felt, but to-night I do. I've been here less than a week, but I have come to realize 'How soon we are forgot,' as Rip said."

It was not a wise speech, and in view of the manner in which he had turned his back upon Angie years before, it was an ungrateful one. It stung her to the quick; and yet he was her guest, and she forbore to reply sharply.

"We are all in the same position," she answered pleasantly, "and out of sight, out of mind, applies to us all. If one forgets, he should not complain at being forgotten."

"That is true," he replied, quick to catch her reproof, "but the grind of life and fight for a competence are factors that must be considered. We are not always our own masters in life."

"No," she said with a laugh, and still resolved to be nice, "I have realized that many times when my own purse was empty and I owed a few bills."

For a moment he paused, as if considering how to answer, and then suddenly rose to go.

"Once again, I beg your pardon for the annoyance I caused you this evening," he said, "and I assure you it won't happen again. I see I alone am to blame for being forgotten. I must make a fresh beginning. May I call again?"

"Why — yes — of course," she replied, also rising, "we are near neighbors, and why shouldn't you?"

And with that slight encouragement, he bade her good night.

There are some invitations to call that mean stay away.

CHAPTER XVII

ANGIE CURTIS

ACCORDING to Zachariah Phinney, or Squire Phinney, the village oracle of Greenvale, Angie Curtis was "A stiddy gal, that had got her growth airly 'n' made the best o' an unfortnit situation." He was the tacit leader of what might be called the anti-David-Curtis faction, and originally had counselled and advised Aunt Comfort to take legal action and compel David to make an equitable settlement of his brother's estate. He had also been the prime mover in organizing the Unitarian church society of Greenvale, and as David was a pillar of the Orthodox church, there was double reason for the two men's enmity. This, of course, was now an old story in Greenvale, but as Angie grew up, Squire Phinney was her earnest well-wisher and adviser, as his daughter was her

bosom friend and confidante. It was he who gave her a position as school-teacher, almost before she was old enough to fill it. When Christmas came each year, his usual remembrance to her was a dress pattern and pair of shoes from his store.

"Ye mustn't mind takin' 'em, girlie," he would say when Angie demurred, "yer father 'n' me was allus good friends, an' if 'twas turn about, he'd do the same."

Among the young people Angie was in a way a puzzle. They had all known and noticed the youthful intimacy between herself and Martin, but as most of them had had the same early experiences, a few of which materialized into marriage and more that did not, no heed was ever paid to the fact that "her beau" had gone away to seek his fortune. Later, however, when other young men tried to pay her serious court and failed, it seemed past understanding. She was handsome and lovable, alone in the world, except for Aunt Comfort's care, entirely dependent upon her own earnings, and likely to be; and just why none of the eligible applicants for her favor received any encouragement

seemed strange. Some of the young men naturally called her "stuck up," but it was invariably those who had received "the mitten." However, she had company a-plenty, and Aunt Comfort's old-fashioned parlor and sitting room were the scene of many a country party, where "Button, button," "Post-office," and similar games were the hilarious enjoyments. Occasionally a dance was held in the town hall, where two fiddles, a cornet, and bass viol rendered Money Musk, Fisher's Hornpipe, Virginia Reel, and other contra-dances in a lively manner, and the young men vied with each other in extra pigeon-wing steps.

When Martin returned, reported to be well off, and boldly walked to church with Angie the first Sunday evening, it was like a bomb-shell dropped into the rural quiet of Greenvale, and the staring was a trifle to the storm of gossip that followed. It was kindly and well meant, however, and he was considered to be doing just what he ought to do, but it gave the village a shock, nevertheless, and a few wise-acres insisted that Angie must have been waiting for him all along.

If she had been, he was not likely to even guess it from her conduct.

Impelled by the sweet memories of his boyhood, he had returned to Greenvale, fully resolved to woo Angie over again. He was mature enough to know what he wanted, had ample means to establish a home and live in modest luxury, had found Angie developed into splendid womanhood, still unwed and no suitor in the way, but—she was unresponsive!

He called again and again, to find her the same cool, well-poised young lady, always gracious, but never sentimental; always charming, but never alluring; and while he occasionally walked home with her from church, he did not again intrude his company there. He took her out driving along the shaded wood roads they had in their youth enjoyed, gathered laurel and all manner of wild flowers, and he had even accompanied her on berry-picking trips. In this pleasant association he discovered a few things, one of which was that no matter where they went, or how much of a reminder of old times the locality might be, reference to the fact met no response. It was as if she wished the

past dead and buried. He also noticed she was no longer the simple, confiding, childlike girl, whom he could fondle and caress at will, but mature in thought and able to cope with him on any subject. Greenvale boasted a modest public library of which Angie had made good use, and he found her better informed than himself upon some subjects.

Another vexation to Martin — it usually is to all men — was that no matter how good an opportunity presented itself for loverlike caressing — the seclusion of wood-bordered roadways, or when he lingered late in Aunt Comfort's parlor, or parted on the porch, some intangible barrier of cool reserve on Angie's part kept him at a distance. In the old times she offered him her lips with childish innocence and perfect faith; now, although she was ten times more attractive, they seldom touched finger-tips.

But a woman's heart or emotion — hard to define and still harder to understand — always has been and always will be moved by curious influences, and Angie, poor, proud, and tender, was no exception. More mature at sixteen than most girls, she had suffered keenly when

her boyish lover deserted her; but to no one, not even Aunt Comfort, had she confided that fact.

And now her faithless one was back again and seeking her with evidently serious intent. At first her pride rebelled, and then it became a motive force in her suitor's favor. She knew all her schoolmates and present associates remembered his youthful devotion and sudden departure, and for him to return after all these years to pay her court anew was a vindication which even her pride could not deny.

Then gossip—and it is a potent factor in all village life—played its part. First one, then another, of her friends slyly congratulated her upon his attentions. His looks, his bearing, his means, were all a matter of kindly comment, and such is the influence of money, or its possession, that people who had never noticed him as a boy now spoke of him as a person of great importance.

But Angie had learned the bitter lesson of man's faithlessness, and learned it well, and the wooing sped slowly.

And then again, womanlike, she was so

exasperatingly changeable, he knew not what to think. Sometimes it seemed to him he had been forgiven the old score — never spoken of — and she appeared to be the Angie of old ; but the moment he assumed it, even by a word, presto ! she grew chilly.

She had been forced to walk, with aching heart, through the valley of despair ; now he was following the same path.

As it was midsummer, his few calls had so far been passed upon the porch, but one evening the weather made an invitation into the parlor necessary. It was not changed except for the piano, and as Martin seated himself upon the old-fashioned, haircloth sofa, it seemed as if he had stepped backward a score of years. Then, too, Angie used to sing for him here, simple Sabbath-school songs and ballads never heard except in a secluded village like Green-vale, and her childish treble, accompanied by the droning melodeon, had seemed very sweet. The melodeon had vanished, but all else was the same, and even Angie now appeared more like her old self. For a time they chatted of commonplaces, and then the force of old

memories wrought their spell, and Martin stepped to the piano.

"Come, Angie," he said, "please be good to me and sing some of the old songs. I know you can; I overheard you the night I came."

For a moment she hesitated, while pride combated with another and better impulse. It was like a turning-point in her own feelings, a new and insidious desire to live over the old memories once again.

"I cannot sing," she answered, and then went to the piano without another word. More than that, so gracious was her mood, she sang, for a full hour, anything and everything he asked for, and with a feeling that made him long to gather her in his arms once more.

"No, not yet," he exclaimed, as she at last turned away, "you have made me feel somewhat churchy, and I want a Sabbath-school song now." And he placed a well-worn copy of "Fresh Laurels" on the music-rack.

But Angie didn't need it, and, turning again with upraised face, she sang:—

"Give, said the little stream,
Give, oh give, give, oh give,

Give, said the little stream,
As it hurried down the hill.
I am small, I know, but where'er I go
Give, oh give, give, oh give,
I am small, I know, but where'er I go
The fields grow greener still.
Singing, singing all the day,
Give away, oh give away,
Singing, singing all the day,
Give, oh give away."

It was a rollicking song, full of the happy laughter of a brook, and it carried Martin back to boyhood as naught else could. He was not devout, except in a very moderate sense, and believed but little of all the orthodoxy ever preached in Greenvale, but he was fast falling in love again with Angie, and that species of insanity is peculiar in its manifestation.

Then came "Gathering at the River," and a dozen more of similar old tenor.

"There now," exclaimed Angie, almost petulantly, as she ceased singing, "if I haven't tired you out, I shall never try again."

"But I shall ask you to again, you may be sure," responded Martin, in his earnest way.

It was now time for departure, and as he

paused in the darkened hall, with Angie close by waiting for him to go, and the tall clock ticking in the empty sitting room, almost did his impulse of love and longing assert itself. One word—one accent—even the shading of a tone in her voice would have precipitated foolishness on his part. But her mood had changed.

“I think it’s going to rain,” she said, as she glanced out into the night, “and I am glad. My flowers are getting thirsty.”

And the good night that responded to his was as cool as the evening air.

CHAPTER XVIII

OLD CY WALKER

FROM the orthodox standpoint of Greenvale, old Cy was a Sabbath-breaker, an unregenerate old scoffer, outcast, vagabond, and one best to avoid. From the boys' point of view he was a most delightful old comrade, whose knowledge of woodcraft was marvellous, whose method of existence was the only right and proper one, and whose companionship was to be sought at all times.

He knew where all the best trout pools were, how to line up and find the bee trees, set snares and traps; where nuts, berries, and wild grapes could be found; and more than all this, he was ready at all times to share this lore with them. He was to them a veritable Leatherstocking outlined on a background of forest, field, and stream, and his shapeless hat, patched raiment, kindly face, and quaint speech were familiar to

all. With dog and gun always, and some of the village boys occasionally for companions, he roamed the woods and followed the streams about Greenvale, or worked for Aunt Comfort when needed. He lived in a hovel on her premises, was temperate, honest, and a friend to everybody except David Curtis. There was ample reason for that exception. In the long ago, old Cy, schoolmate, friend, and companion of Amzi Curtis, and later working for him in the mill, had aspired to own a respectable dwelling. He bought a small tract of land on the village outskirts, contracted with David Curtis for lumber, and when the house was built, gave him a mortgage to secure payment. That was almost accomplished when Amzi so mysteriously vanished. But lack of employment and illness fell to old Cy's lot; he failed to pay as agreed; then David foreclosed, and after that old Cy became a vagabond, as it were.

Martin had been one of his boy admirers, and now since his return had induced the old man to take him fishing, and later to superintend the building of his dam and the clearing of land for a trout preserve. It was

while thus engaged that a new thought came to Martin — nothing less than to buy the Mizzy falls and swamp above, build a low dam where the falls were, and flood a large area for trout and pleasure purposes.

There was also another consideration.

Those falls, the key-note to any manufacturing opportunities or future growth of Greenville, were a valuable power that might become more so, and as a purely business investment, it seemed a wise one to Martin. For a few days he thought about it, and the more he thought, the more tempting in many ways the investment seemed.

"Cy," he said, when they were by themselves, "how much of the Mizzy swamp does Dave Curtis own, and what do you imagine he would ask for the falls and land above them?"

Old Cy looked at him in astonishment. "I know every rod he owns above 'em," he answered finally, "but ye couldn't buy one 'thout payin' ten times what it's wuth, 'n' then a deed on 't ain't no good 'thout Amzi's signin'."

"Oh, I expect that," answered Martin, indifferently, "and as far as Amzi's signature, — why, he'll never come back. It must be twenty years since he disappeared."

"I'm not so sure o' that," responded old Cy, resolutely; "I've allus held he was still alive, 'n' I believe it yit. Ez fer Dave's settin' a price on the Mizzy falls 'n' his land, he's been figgering with some one out o' town already. I heerd him."

"You heard him!"

"I did, fer sartin. I was up the Mizzy one day last spring, huntin' fer a mink trap that had got dragged off, 'n' I heard some one comin' through the brush 'n' laid low. 'Twas Dave 'n' a city man, 'n' Dave was showin' him round and tellin' him how handy 'twas to float logs down the Mizzy in spring freshets, 'n' about how much he owned. They sot down on a log 'n' talked more 'n' an hour, 'n' I heerd it all. The city man had a scheme to build a mill 'n' grind up wood 'n' make paper, but they didn't make a dicker, fer Dave sot such an ungodly price, the man wouldn't pay it."

"How much?"

"Thirty thousand dollars!"

Martin gave a low whistle. He had heard Curtis was considered "sharp," but this was such a fabulous sum for the impassable Misery swamp and water-power that it took his breath away.

"I've kept watch fer that man showin' up ever since," continued old Cy, "an' if he ever does, I'll open his eyes 'bout Amzi 'n' one or two other matters. I've been roostin' round on back fences now fer a good many years, waitin' to git square with Dave Curtis! Why, all his medder land 'n' houses 'n' both mills 'n' woodland ain't taxed fer but six thousand dollars, 'n' askin' thirty fer the Mizzy swamp 'n' them tumble-down mills ain't no better 'n stealin'."

Then Martin laughed, for old Cy's ideas of business were as primitive as his method of living.

"I ain't said a word to nobody," added the old man, with true hunter's instinct, "'n' I wish you wouldn't yet awhile, 'n' don't be thinkin' o' buying land o' Dave Curtis 'n' gettin' robbed. He'll croak 'fore many years 'n' then ye kin git it fer what it's wuth; 'sides, Amzi might show up any day."

"What reason have you for believing Amzi still alive?" inquired Martin, a little touched by the blind faith of old Cy. "No one else here shares your belief, so Dr. Sol says."

"Wal," answered the old man, slowly, "it's a curis notion o' mine, but him 'n' me wus just like two brothers, 'n' used to fish 'n' hunt together, 'n' spend hours in the woods talkin' 'bout all sorts o' things. He had queer ideas about some matters, 'n' one wus that all kinds o' animals had souls, same ez we hev. 'They all live over again,' he used to say, 'only they keep on changin' shapes back 'n' forth. Birds become animals, 'n' animals birds; 'n' men 'n' women become cows 'n' pigs 'n' cats 'n' back to human shape agin. I shall, 'n' so will you, 'n' if I change fust, I'll find some way o' tellin' you,' 'n' I believe he would, jest as sure ez I believe I'm livin'. Then agin, he was a good deal younger 'n I am, and what I call handy in the woods. Give him an axe 'n' a gun 'n' drop him down in the middle o' a wilderness, 'n' he'll take keer o' himself in the dead o' winter. His sense o' hearin' an' smellin' was keener 'n a fox's, 'n'

he could see a bird or hear a squirrel a mile off, 'n' ez fur trackin' game, he could beat any dog that ever run."

"I don't recall him very well," asserted Martin, "but I remember there was a bitter hatred between him and his brother, and I always supposed he was out of his mind when he disappeared. Of course I heard of the peculiar will, but I imagined the law had settled that long ago."

"I don't believe no law kin rob a live man o' what he inherits," answered old Cy, earnestly, "'n' if Aunt Comfort 'n' Angie was a mind, they cud make old Dave trouble. They won't, though. It ain't Aunt Comfort's natur'."

"Tell me what sort of looking man Amzi was," continued Martin, as a curious thought came to him, "and what were his peculiarities. I don't recall him very well."

"Wal, he was tall 'n' lanky, with wide starin' eyes 'n' queer ways. He liked to be by himself a good deal, 'n' once in a while I uster come onter him alone in the woods 'n' twangin' a jews'-harp. He allus carried one with him."

For one instant Martin's heart almost stopped

beating, as the wilderness hermit, now so accurately described, flashed into mind. But, great heaven! could it be possible? And then came the thought of Angie, now growing very dear to him, and what this seeming revelation might mean to her, if true.

He sat down to think.

As a rule Martin seldom lost his head, or spoke without thought. He had battled with shrewd, hard-headed, grasping men, when a word too much or too soon meant everything, and he had learned caution. To now disclose, even by a hint, what he felt was true would mean to set all Greenvale in an uproar. Old Cy might be trusted, and again he might not. It was, at least, safest not to try him.

"I don't know what to think about David's price," Martin said at last to old Cy, who stood watching him; "it staggers me. I had an idea the falls and swamp above might be bought for perhaps ten thousand or less."

And old Cy never suspected that dust had been thrown into his eyes.

"I'd rather you'd keep to yourself what I've said, Cy," Martin added a little later;

"I certainly won't pay what you say David asks, and I'm not anxious to buy at any price. If this stranger comes around again, however, let me know at once. I'd like to meet him."

When Martin was by himself again, and could think coherently, a new horizon seemed to open before him, and, as might be expected, Angie was in the foreground. Most of her history he knew very well; some details had been added by the doctor, but now the situation was all changed. If this old hermit proved to be her father,—as Martin felt almost sure he was,—if he could be induced to return to Greenvale and assert his rights, what must it mean to Angie and Aunt Comfort? The half-demented, or queer condition of mind, in which the old fellow seemed to be, was another factor, and what could be done with him in Greenvale? It was a problem hard to solve, and, turn it which way he would, one that was pathetic, tragic, and almost horrible.

It was long past midnight that night ere he ceased thinking of it, or decided upon a course of action.

CHAPTER XIX

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

IN Martin's long hours of trying to solve the problem, now so suddenly confronting him, one danger seemed imminent—that David Curtis might sell out to this stranger before it could be proved that his brother still lived. Land could be attached; but money, once in the hands of a man like David, was not easily reached by law. What Martin decided to do, cost what it might, was not to buy the Mizzy power and land, but keep David from selling it until the existence of Amzi could be proved. There was but one way to do it—to secure an option and pay a small sum down to bind the bargain.

"It will cost me a few thousand dollars," he said to himself, when a decision was reached, "but it may save Angie her heritage." And Martin was fast reaching that point where

money seemed like brown leaves compared to a woman's love.

To go to David without actual currency to pay down was useless, and there was no bank in Greenvale. Early the next morning Martin packed his valise, and telling the doctor that business of importance called him to the city, he left Greenvale on the stage.

He had many times taken journeys that were tedious—all-day stage rides to reach the wilderness, and others quite as tiresome; but never one that seemed quite so long as this. When a day in the city had been consumed in obtaining legal advice from a friend, buying a few books and new songs for Angie, and a late model rifle for old Cy, Martin started for Greenvale with a roll of currency, and the journey back seemed interminable.

It was late and he was dusty and very tired ere the doctor's pleasant home was reached, and by that time Martin had realized that to carry out what he hoped, and not set Greenvale gossips agog, required both tact and diplomacy.

"I've learned that some capitalist is after

the Mizzy power," he observed to the doctor when they sat down to supper, "and I think I'll buy it as a speculation; would you?"

"No," answered Dr. Sol, bluntly, "I wouldn't. In the first place David won't sell except for a fabulous price, and if the unexpected should happen and Amzi ever show up, your title wouldn't be worth a fig. The best way," he added, winking at his wife, "is for you to marry Angie and then sue old David for her rights. It will make an awful stir here, but you will win, I'm sure."

"You seem to think Angie has already said yes," returned Martin, looking pleased, "but I'm not so sure of it."

"That's right," laughed the doctor, "but keep on thinking she won't, and you'll win. I've told her if she didn't marry you, I'd never speak to her again. I've heard," continued the doctor, as Martin made no response to this sally, "that some one was here last spring trying to buy David's property, but wouldn't pay the price."

"I still think I'll make him an offer," answered Martin, to close the subject, "and if I

get it and don't sell, I'll turn it into a fish-pond."

It was a game of diamond cut diamond when Martin approached David Curtis the next day, and one not relished by him. He found the old man working in his sawmill, and, without wasting words, asked him if he would set a price on the Mizzy power and all land above the falls.

"Wal, I might 'n' I mightn't," answered David, looking quizzically at Martin with sharkish eyes, "dew ye want to buy it?"

"Perhaps, if I could get it low enough," answered Martin, quietly; "I have a business friend in the city who has been looking for some available water privilege. He has about decided to locate at Riverton. If I could buy yours cheap enough, I might induce him to change his plans and locate here."

"Wal, I don't keer much about sellin' out," replied David, beginning to whittle a stick, "the place has been ourn a good many jinerations 'n' I'm sorter 'tached to 't." He paused a moment, eyeing Martin, then continued, "Ye might make a dicker with this chap, mebbe, 'n'

I'd 'low ye all ye'd git over what I call a fair price."

"No," answered Martin, reading the old hypocrite like a book, "if I do anything about it, I shall buy the property outright, form a stock company, and go in myself. I'm thinking of residing here permanently now."

"An' what be ye callating to do with the property if ye do?"

"Why, I'd build a pulp-mill and possibly make paper besides," responded Martin, also seating himself and beginning to whittle. "That's what my friend is up to, but he is opposed to Greenvale for a location. It's too far from a railroad."

"How'd it strike ye if I leased ye the power 'n' sold ye land fer a mill?"

"No-o-o," replied Martin, very slowly, as if thinking, "I wouldn't put any money into that plan and I know my friend wouldn't. There might be some litigation as to the title, also, later on. I'm told it's not quite clear as it is, and your brother's child, Angie, has some claim; is that so?"

The diamonds were beginning to scratch now.

"That's a lie," returned David, sharply, "an' I kin prove it. My brother didn't have nothing but debts when he died an' I paid 'em, an' the land's mine by will."

"I've heard also," replied Martin, casually, now that he had a fair start, "that your brother was not dead and has been seen about here within a few years. I hardly believe that, however."

For one instant David's wrinkled face grew livid, and the hand holding the whittled stick shook as with palsy. "It's a lie," he almost shouted, "a scand'lus lie 'n' told by an infiddle here t' injure me."

"I've no doubt of that," replied Martin, smiling calmly at the old miser's excitement, "but that story has been told, and a stranger coming here will be sure to hear it. I am not certain myself but that your brother's child, Angie, has some legal claim yet against your estate,—some inherited dower right. It's a matter that doesn't concern me, however. The only question is—do you want to sell the Mizzy power and land above, and can you give me a clear title?"

"I kin, 'n' 'cordin' to law," replied David, in an ugly tone, "'n' ez for the price, what'll ye give?"

"How much land do you own above the falls, and what will you take for it, and the power?" answered Martin, facing about and looking squarely into David's face.

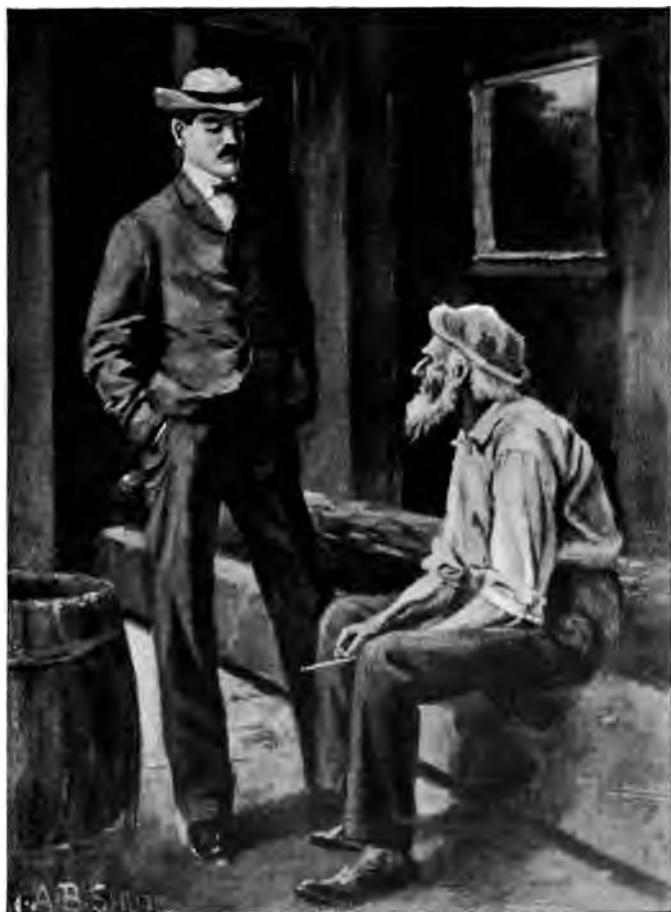
For a moment the two sharp bargain-makers glanced into each other's eyes, the sparring at an end, and each sure the other had been lying.

"I'll take forty thousand dollars fer the two hundred 'n' odd acres above 'n' the falls 'n' both mills," returned the elder, doggedly.

"And I'll give you thirty thousand inside a year, and pay you two thousand down to-day, to bind the bargain," admitted the younger.

David shook his head. "No," he said, "I ain't sellin' on them terms."

"Well, I'm not anxious to buy," rejoined Martin, drawing a big roll of bills into view. "All I wanted was to see if I could get an option on the property and induce my friend to locate here. I'll make you one more offer," he added, returning the money to his pocket, "I'll give you ten dollars for a thirty days'



"WHAT'LL YE GIVE?"—Page 176

option, or you can accept my first offer." And he rose to go.

David rose also. It was a critical moment. Deep down in his heart he knew Martin's innuendo was true, and that Angie had a legal claim against him. More than that, it was within the bounds of possibility that Amzi was still alive. He distrusted Martin and, a consummate hypocrite himself, believed all others to be the same; and yet, here was two thousand dollars almost within grasp. It inflamed him and made him tremble with the miser's greed—and thirty thousand was all he dared ask the other! This would-be buyer had undoubtedly been lying, but the money was a reality. All this flashed through David's mind as Martin turned away, and avarice won!

"I'll take yer fust offer," he said doggedly, "an' ye've got to sign a paper now, 'greein' to pay the rest inside a year, or forfeit the two thousand."

"I'm satisfied to do that," returned Martin, smiling serenely, "but I also want a signed agreement from you to deliver me a warranty deed if I do pay the balance inside a year."

And when these mutual distrust papers had been exchanged, the two thousand dollars counted over three times, with trembling fingers, by David, and Martin bade him a curt good morning, and walked away on air, the Mizzy falls seemed filled with joyous laughter and the birds never sang so sweetly before. His heart was opening anew to the wondrous miracle of love, and the divine light of a new life was within view.

"I've saved you your heritage, little woman," he said softly to himself, when Angie's home came in sight, "and maybe sometime you'll forgive me the old score."

CHAPTER XX

"THOU SHALT NOT STEAL"

OLD Cy Walker once said, "If the devil should hang a fi'penny bit o'er the middle o' hell, Dave Curtis wouldn't rest till he got it," and while a scarcely quotable expression, it best illustrates the man.


He had deep-set, cold, gray eyes, never knowing a shade of tenderness; his hawk nose betrayed the miser as his retreating forehead did the egotist, and his bloodless hand-clasp was as chill as a pump-handle in winter. He was so thin the wind could almost blow through him; his self-conceit was abnormal, and he was miserly mean. In addition he was superstitiously pious.

Old Cy, perhaps his bitterest critic, asserted as a reason for this, "Dave's soul's so small he's 'fraid it'll git lost in the round-up, 'n' if he's likely to git into heaven, I'll chance the other place."

There was cause for this feeling, for when David foreclosed the mortgage and turned old Cy, crippled by rheumatism, out of house and home in midwinter, he made a bitter enemy of him. It was spite, of course, on David's part, and in revenge for things said by old Cy, but none the less merciless. Aunt Comfort had cared for the old man as she did for all unfortunates, and now he lived in a hovel and never missed a chance of sneering at David.

There had been a time, however, in the earlier history of Greenvale, when David Curtis was more respected. It was before Amzi disappeared, and when David, prospering in his mill, gave liberally to the church. He was close and mean even then; but so were others in that small village where dollars were hard to obtain.

Then came Amzi's loss by the flood and the death of his wife, his disappearance, David's refusal to pay his debts, or even to make any provision for the doubly orphaned child Angeline. It was a tragedy followed by a scandal, and when Greenvale had done discussing it, what little respect there had been



for David had vanished. Not even Parson Jones could defend him, although as David still held a mortgage on the new church and rented one of the best pews, besides contributing to the cause in other ways, the worthy dominie avoided all mention of him.

There are times and reasons even in religion when speech is silver and silence golden. The inflexible law of compensation, however, says that no man can do a wrong and avoid its penalty, and the lash of injustice once unwound always recoils.

It did on David, as it will on all in this finite world, and slowly, year by year, while Aunt Comfort cared for the homeless child Angie, refusing even to ask David for justice, the little public of Greenvale as slowly but surely turned its back on him. They spoke with him, of course, on Sundays; they patronized his mills, as perforce they must. He was a man of means, paid taxes, and could not be entirely ignored; but none respected him.

There was, however, a more potent lash than public sentiment, slowly unwinding to smite him, and that was superstition. In his narrow


cranium, though never admitted, lurked the ghost idea. With this, also, was a doubt as to the fate of Amzi. At times David felt sure he must be dead; and again that he was not. There had been bad blood between them, bitter quarrels, almost blows; and then Amzi had vanished in the night, as has been told. It was not the act of one with suicidal intent, or revenge; and yet it sowed the seeds of a revenge most horrible.

There were also other factors and influences conspiring toward this revenge. David had never married, and when his mother, who survived his father many years, passed on, he still remained in the family home with an old negress as cook and housekeeper, and, to utilize the spare rooms, insisted that the men who worked for him in the mills should board there. Naturally it was a cheerless home, without children or visitors of any kind, and as David gradually found himself shunned by the townspeople, he was forced to live an almost hermit life. Even those who shared his home had nothing in common with him, and, although his men ate at the same table, there was no

sympathy or sociability between them. It was a mechanical existence in a great gloomy house, where the creaking of loose boards, the perpetual roar of the adjacent falls, and the moaning of the winds in giant elms at night always sounded ominous. Such desolate homes become uncanny to their occupants in time, and so did this to David. There was also another insidious influence that worked on his mind, and one even stronger than ghostly sounds at night.

On the wall back of the tall pulpit—from which the Reverend Jones each Sunday explained God's plan of salvation, with occasional descriptions of the city with jasper walls and pearly gates, as well as the other place—were the Ten Commandments. David had to read them once a week at least, and the "Thou shalt not steal," as the years rolled on, seemed to smite him more and more. He was sure of his own salvation, however; he still held a mortgage on the church, and did not insist that it be paid; he contributed toward the expenses, as usual, and when the trumpet sounded and the dead arose, he was sure he would march upwards somewhere to the seat

he had been paying for. On the other hand, when the eternal doom of sinners was described, David was sure that old Cy and all his enemies were to be the lost ones. He had no qualms of conscience; he was purely selfish in all his conclusions; and yet that eighth commandment kept boring into his conscience year after year. He knew he had wronged his brother—was still wronging his brother's child; and yet so peculiar is religious conviction, that he felt himself excused for it, so long as he believed in the gospel as preached by Jones. And yet that commandment annoyed him. Often he would resolve not to read it, and then it gave him no peace until he did. It was like a magnet, and out of the entire ten the one that drew his eyes first. And then, his solitary, unsocial, and selfish life worked its inevitable result. He grew more superstitious, and the fear that Amzi might return in body or spirit haunted him at night. He saw him in his dreams, imagined him peeping into the house when a board creaked, and, waking in the dead of night, he read, "Thou shalt not steal" glow-



ing in the darkness. He grew timid, dared not go alone to dark rooms for fear of meeting Amzi, and as his mind became diseased from brooding over the supernatural, the ghost taint increased.

And now, in the midst of all these fears, came the desire to escape them. It followed the call from a stranger who sought to buy his most valued possession, the Mizzy power—in fact, a sequence to that. In spite of his conceit, David realized he had but few friends, and now to turn his possessions into cold cash and establish himself elsewhere seemed wise. He had, in his business dealings, visited River-ton often, and there received more or less consideration as the wealthiest resident of Greenvale—an homage very sweet to him. He would escape the sight of old Cy, Aunt Comfort, Angie, and other reproaches, and best of all, as he imagined, escape the haunting fear of Amzi.

Then came Martin with his astonishing proposal to buy the Mizzy falls, and, during that sharp bargain-driving, to insinuate facts and dangers that gave David cold chills. It had

resulted in his securing two thousand dollars, and also an addition to his stock of worry almost unbearable. It was a proposal and payment, also, that David, shrewd villain that he was, could not fathom. He had heard on all sides that Martin had returned to Green-vale wealthy. He knew of his youthful attachment to Angie, and his now open and pointed attentions which undoubtedly meant marriage; and as if this combination of danger was not sufficient, this bold young man who carried a big roll of money as if it were a handkerchief, had hinted of Angie's legal rights against him, that could most likely be sustained by law! And now, the more David pondered over this business transaction, the more sure he was that it meant a lawsuit later on. He had the two thousand dollars fast enough, he had signed an agreement which in law was almost as good as a warranty deed; and yet, before twenty-four hours had passed, so sure was he that he had walked into a trap, that he would have gladly paid twice two thousand for the return of that agreement.

His punishment had only just begun.

CHAPTER XXI

"SCAR FACE, THE AVENGER"

NEZER was not a bad boy at heart. To him Aunt Comfort was a rotund embodiment of all that was good and motherly in womankind. For her — if within call — he would run his legs off, and Angie was his idea of what angels were. He hated his best clothes and church-going equally, minded Angie at school with doglike humility, learned his lessons with surprising ease, and perpetrated the worst tricks with an innocent manner that disarmed punishment. He was the terror of the village when fruits were ripe, made the life of Hans a burden, and when out of Aunt Comfort's sight, always up to some new mischief aimed at him. He had fed that phlegmatic immigrant red pepper deftly hid in pie, coaxed him to take a noonday nap pillowed on a red ant-hill, and then when he was asleep, stirred up those vicious insects; he

had caught an eel on a set pole and lowered it writhing on the hook down inside Hans's shirt when again napping, and finally put an active snapping turtle in his bed.

He did all these things out of pure mischief, but against David Curtis he bore a grudge. It dated from that unhappy epoch ending in a bread-and-water diet, and Nezer missed no chance to get square with David. In fact getting square with those who injured him was a cardinal point in the boy's nature. Another thing, he was close mouthed, and secretly not only plotted and planned, but afterwards enjoyed his revenges. How much fruit he stole from David's orchard, how often he let bars down and cows into corn-fields, how much "garden sass" he maliciously destroyed in midnight raids, no one but himself knew, and he never told. For years he waged a guerilla warfare alone on David, and then one day sharp and perhaps deserved punishment overtook him. There was a secluded pool in the upper Mizzy meadow owned by his enemy, and here Nezer and his mates were wont to come many times each summer to enjoy a swim. To reach

it they had to cross David's best meadow, trampling the grass and quite destroying it about the pool. It angered David, to whom loss of even grass was misery, and whenever he caught them there, retribution with an ox-goad followed. They came under cover of night, however, and one boy would take turn as sentinel and David still suffered. He grew desperate, finally, and as a last resort, drove stakes along each bank of the pool and then strung a network of barbed wire across under water. It was a merciless and altogether heartless trap, and fate decreed, one evening, that Nezer should be the first and only one to leap into it. How he suffered, pierced in a dozen places and terribly scratched, how his agonized screams were keen joy to David, how Nezer, dripping blood, ran after the rest of the boys and halted not until they reached safety and a chance to dress outside David's possessions, need not be enlarged upon.

Nezer had mildly hated David before — now it was changed to murderous intensity, and his only ambition was to seek vengeance. He took none of the boys into his confidence, but true to

the thief's caution, inherited from his father, resolved to act alone.

And now while David was in sore distress over Martin Frisbie's probable legal assault and a growing dread of ghostly visitation, there occurred a series of events well calculated to drive a superstitious man insane. The first was to find that every tool in the sawmill had vanished, crowbars, canthooks, extra saws, hammers, chains, were all missing in the morning. A new supply was obtained, and a few days later David was awakened at midnight to hear the mill going, and a shower of sparks flying from the saw playing up and down against a crowbar wedged in the log cradle. Later the grist-mill — never locked — was visited by a ghostly miller, and bags of grain poured into the raceway, belts cut, and, as a final message, the gates raised and millstones found rumbling at early dawn. It was no ghost, of course, even to the superstitious mind of David, but an enemy of the most malicious sort, and yet the property loss produced almost as much suffering as an actual spook. David locked and barred the mill

doors after this, only to find it useless, for about once a week the mill was visited by this unrighteous enemy, and damage inflicted. Then he rigged a cordon of fine wire around the grist-mill, attached to doors and connecting with his house, so that any disturbance would communicate and ring a bell. It worked to the extent of causing David and his men to rush to the mill with lanterns to find the belts again cut, and the stones grinding away, but no sight or sound of an intruder. Then other depredations followed. A dog that had been secured as guard was found dead the next morning and swollen double from poison; a small raft of logs above the falls were cut loose and allowed to drift over and land in inextricable confusion below; stones took on a habit of entering the house unbidden through windows, and at odd intervals other night mischief was perpetrated. Then the two men who boarded with David grew nervous, and the old negress said, "I 'clare to gracious, dese premises is gittin' hanted, 'n' if it doan stop, I'll quit here, suah 's yo' born." She was only restrained by an increase in her

wages, painful to David, and a temporary lull in the midnight visits.

Nezer, in addition to his mischief-inventing faculties, also dearly loved to masquerade. He had become the possessor of a few dime novels, one of which portrayed on the cover a realistic picture of "Scar Face, the Avenger," and to imitate the raiment and habits of this savage was keen enjoyment to Nezer. He had fashioned a head-dress, and crest of turkey feathers, obtained a hideous mask, and, having hidden these in Aunt Comfort's barn, waited the right and proper occasion to exploit them in secret. To try their effect on Hans was too tame; besides Hans would give him away, and Nezer, always secretive, had grown wary with age. There was no limit to the fun he planned to have with that blood-curdling mask and head-gear, but his hero, Scar Face, had always swooped down upon his victims unawares, and Nezer felt he must. He had some time previous purloined an old night-shirt with the intention of playing ghost when Hallowe'en came. He was also an expert in the use of stilts, and, nimble as a

squirrel, could stride off on them faster than a man could run. With these accoutrements and a nature much akin to the dime-novel hero he worshipped, it may be easily inferred that Nezer was a combination quite likely to excite a quiet village like Greenvale.

And Nezer hated David Curtis with Scar-Face ferocity. For weeks David had lived a miserable existence, and worried as to the outcome of Martin's supposed enmity. He knew he was guilty, and once dragged before even the most petty tribunal would have no defence, but must make restitution to his brother's child and be disgraced as well. So sure did he feel this outcome was only a matter of time, he thought of forestalling it by going to Aunt Comfort and offering her a lump sum for Angie's past keep, and as much for her own signature releasing him from all obligation. He would have much preferred negotiating with Martin, but of that young man's relations with Angie he was not at all certain, and although more humiliating, it was safer to deal direct with the injured ones. He was in this quandary when his direct persecution

began, and as that continued, it became agony boiled down. To lose five cents was misery, but when the sum swelled to many dollars and depredations were repeated night after night, it became a torment. Then his ghostly dread grew apace. With all his vigilance, and aided by his men taking turns watching, not once had they seen or heard aught that betokened a flesh-and-blood visitor. All he knew was that sometime in the night some one visited his mills, wrought malicious mischief, and vanished. It was for revenge beyond question, but by whom, and for what? Was it some one in the village, or was it a stranger hiding in the woods by day, and stealing on to his premises by night like an Indian wreaking swift, unerring vengeance?

For weeks also David had not known one moment of peace or one hour of untroubled sleep. Not trusting his men even, he had kept watch himself, ready to sally forth at any sound, and when the depredations ceased, he still kept on expecting them. For a week this vigil continued, and then one night, half asleep and partially clad, David caught the sharp

thud of a small stone thrown against his house, and bounding out heard the low rumble of the stones in the grist-mill across the Mizzy. The moon, a week past its full, had just risen, and as David paused a moment on the steps to listen, he noted how the mills, the trees, the bridge across the Mizzy, and the falls just above, seemed ghostly in the spectral light. It was dreadful, and those loud rumbling millstones more so. But revenge and greed conquered fear, and, keeping always in shadow, and stooping as he walked, he started for the grist-mill. The trees gave partial concealment until the bridge was reached, and here he halted to listen once again. And what a weird, midnight scene it was, with the falls white in the moonlight, not ten rods away, their voice half concealing the rumbling millstones' deeper sounds, while all about the spectral shadows of the trees reached out to meet him. One moment only he paused, and then, still crouching, crept forward step by step down the little incline beyond the bridge, across the mill sluice, now filled with rushing water, then turning to the left up the driveway to the mill. Each step a little

slower, as he drew near, and a loud thumping of pulse that beat upon his brain. And then, again, pausing with a sense of deathly fear, his mouth and eyes wide open — slowly, very slowly, from behind the mill, advanced a horrible *something*, with white ghostly body and hideous, leering face, above which waved a crest of feathers.

One moment only David stared transfixed with horror at the awful apparition, twice as tall as a man, and then, as it strode toward him with giant steps, he sank to the ground unconscious.

Nezer was avenged!

CHAPTER XXII

A SHOCK TO GREENVALE

AUNT COMFORT was paring apples, Hannah putting away the breakfast dishes, Angie, with sleeves up, disclosing rounded arms, was washing a panful of green pickles Nezer had just brought in, when Aunt Lorey burst into the kitchen. "David Curtis was took with a fit last night," she gasped, "'n' he's gone ravin' crazy. Some on 'em heered him hollerin' like a loon 'bout midnight, 'n' the next, he rushed into the house screamin', 'O Lord, Lord, save me!' They had to tie him hand and foot 'n' Dr. Sol says he's gone clean daft!" And having delivered this astonishing message, she sank into a chair, fanning herself with her apron.

"For the land's sake!" exclaimed Aunt Comfort, dropping her paring-knife, and staring at the caller with open mouth, while Angie turned in mute astonishment, her hands full of wet pickles. No one observed that Nezer suddenly vanished.

"And what was the cause on 't," continued Aunt Comfort, eagerly, "'n' is he likely to die?"

"Nobody seems to know," responded Aunt Lorey, "he was just took, that was all, 'n' what he was doin' out o' the house that time o' night is a myst'ry. They found the grist-mill goin' an' the men say 'tain't the fust time that somebody's been prowlin' round there nights for weeks back."

And this was a fair sample of the recital that spread like wild-fire over Greenvale that August morn. It had been known that strange happenings had occurred up at the Curtis place, that some enemy had made nightly visits there, stealing and destroying with evident malice, but who, and for what special reason, no one knew. Some said it was just compensation for his many and well-known acts of meanness, a few ascribed it to supernatural causes, and one or two hinted that Amzi, half demented, might have escaped from some asylum and returned to thus avenge himself. This latter surmise, however, seemed so unreasonable that no one believed it.

"He has brain fever," was the explicit information Dr. Sol had imparted that afternoon, when he called at Aunt Comfort's, "and

his mind is deranged. It was brought on, no doubt, by some sudden fright while out watching for this night visitor. He may recover and he may not. His age is against him."

"I s'pose we oughter go thar and try to do somethin'," Aunt Comfort asserted to Angie later on. "He's been livin' like a hyena all these years, with that wench doin' the cookin', 'n' 'twon't do to let him die that way. He's your uncle, in spite o' his meanness."

And in thus rising above all sense of injury and personal feeling, Aunt Comfort showed her broad and truly Christian charity.

But Angie was not so ready to respond. Her own early sorrow, the humiliation she had endured, the long-continued self-denials, the many times she had met her uncle well wrapped in a buffalo robe when she had to step out into the deep snow and let him pass, the countless times she had watched his hypocritical face in church, knowing he had been and was robbing her of her heritage, had sunk deep into her heart, and her first thought was, "Let him die alone like a dog; he deserves it!"

But Aunt Comfort was a beacon light of

goodness and homely sense to her and she made no protest, and so it came to pass that these two angels of mercy took themselves to the cheerless home of David Curtis for the first time in many years.

And Aunt Lorey — who never missed attending all the funerals occurring in Greenvale, and was said to enjoy them — also accompanied these two, possibly expecting a funeral in this case.

“It’s only good nursing that will save him,” asserted Dr. Sol that night to Aunt Comfort, “but it’s an outrage for you and Angie to stay here. He isn’t worth it. Better let me hire some one.”

But Aunt Comfort persisted, and all that long night they ministered to their patient, tossing, groaning, and occasionally screaming in feverish delirium.

And what a tragic revelation of guilty conscience and supernatural fear it was to them, for the sick man, in his delirious mutterings, lived over and recited all the dread fears and the agony of mind he had endured for many weeks.

First it was his plans and projects, then his greedy hope of obtaining thirty thousand dol-

lars, and then his suspicion of Martin; sure he was an implacable enemy and bound to rob him for Angie. Mixed in with this were comments on Martin's intentions toward her, and his own half-formed intentions to make restitution; a hodge-podge of disconnected statements, but through it all ran a thread of ghostly dread—it was Amzi lurking in the woods, Amzi perched on the mill, Amzi hiding in shadow, Amzi stealing tools, cutting belts, doing this and that, but always Amzi, an enemy and a terror.

At times the delirious man would try to leap out of bed, screaming with deadly fear, and it was all one of his men who had stood by could do to hold him down. As for the old negress, the spookish drama had at the outset proven too much for her, and she had taken refuge at a neighbor's. In his dire extremity, a helpless, delirious, suffering wretch, and the richest man in Greenvale—the only ones who took pity on him and came to his succor were those whom he had wronged most. And what shame and humiliation it was to Aunt Comfort and Angie to sit by and hear the dry bones of their family skeleton thus rattled about before others need not be specified.

With daylight came a change, for the fever slowly yielded to Aunt Comfort's "arbs" and the doctor's pills, and the sick man began to doze. It had been a night experience the like of which Angie at least had never known, and almost as tragic a one to Aunt Comfort. But there was one touch of satisfaction in it, for as they, leaving Aunt Lorey in charge, were about to depart, some strange intuition came to their patient, for he suddenly sat bolt upright and looked at them with horrified but sane eyes. Only a moment, and then, muttering, "My God, is it you?" he sank back upon his pillow.

Aunt Comfort came back that night bringing jellies, and relieving Aunt Lorey while she cooked broth and nursed the still very sick man, and later Angie came bringing freshly cut flowers, but remaining only a moment. She would not speak to or look at David, but she would show him so much of kindly thought and pity—and that was all. That long night of insane raving, disclosing so much and reopening so many of her own wounds, had been too much for her, and she could no more converse with the man who had so wronged her

father and then herself than she could with a murderer. Neither did David die, though many in the village felt it would be a wise dispensation of Providence if he should, and Aunt Lorey missed the expected excitement of a funeral; not that she really wanted even the much-de-spised David to die — far from it; but she was a peculiar body, unlike any one else in Greenvale, and funerals furnished her a certain excitement, much akin to pleasure. She was ever ready to nurse the sick, she would join her tears with all mourners when the end came; she would work gladly, — wash, bake, and cook all manner of edibles for out-of-town relations; she was useful at arranging flowers and other necessary adjuncts to such events; she listened interestedly, and always remembered all the minister said, and, to adapt an expression once applied to Amzi Curtis by Cy Walker, she was “handy at funerals.”

But of David's sudden and mysterious illness and its outcome Dr. Sol's remark to Martin will best reflect the village verdict, and must be quoted.

“I never knew of such a complete case of

heaping coals of fire," he said, "and such an object lesson in forgiving as Aunt Comfort and Angie have meted out to that old skinflint. What he thought and felt when he came to his senses and saw those two beside his bed would have made a better text than any the Reverend Jones ever found in the Bible. But what caused his illness is a mystery quite beyond me. By all reports, his premises have been haunted by some malicious night visitor, and David must have gone out and met him."

It was many days ere Aunt Comfort and her assistant nurse could leave the sick man, and then he had to "persuade" Aunt Lorey, by means of liberal compensation, to remain and act as housekeeper, for the colored woman would no more set foot again in "dat hanted" house than in a den of lions.

But the mystery remained and grew to a seven times seven days' wonder in Greenvale. And strange to say, a story began to circulate that David had seen his brother in the woods above the falls, and that it was meeting him that night in the mill that had caused the shock. Whether this tale started from Aunt Lorey's

report of David's ravings, or from old Cy's assertions that Amzi would return soon or late, no one knew. It became current gossip, however, in a short time, and so excited was Greenvale over it that a searching party of men and boys was organized, and the entire length and breadth of Mizzy swamp and the adjacent woods for many miles was thoroughly examined. It availed nothing, of course, except to retard David's recovery and cause him to continue in the same unhappy state of worriment as before his shock. He also had to close the grist-mill, for the man who acted as miller was a trifle superstitious and obtained other employment. It was no concern of his, of course, and yet the fact that some night visitor was like to come there again was spookish at best, and there was the suspicion that a long-ago dead man might any moment bob up out of some bin or stalk out of a dark corner. But the ghost manifestations ceased, for Nezer was too much scared by the hubbub he had created, and having hid his Scar-Face raiment, kept his secret to himself like a wise boy, and the mystery remained unsolved.

CHAPTER XXIII

SUNDAY EVENING

IN Greenvale, as in all rural towns, Sunday evening was "sparking night," when lads and lassies put on their very best, the front parlor was given up to Jane or Huldah, their swains allowed all possible chance to reach popping point, and the old folks kept shady. As a rule all the young folks gathered separately at the church, and when service was over, each rustic Romeo hurried to the porch to there await his heart's desire, and when the smiling maids "like snowbirds willing to be mated" appeared, faced the music with beating heart to receive joy supreme or the mitten. Only engaged couples walked to the sanctuary together, and to do so was a tacit admission of betrothal.

It was this solecism on Martin's part on his first Sunday evening that caused Angie so

much embarrassment. He had not repeated it ; in fact, so uncertain was he of his ground with her that he had avoided Sunday evening church attendance almost entirely afterwards.

By the time the excitement caused by David's night scare and almost fatal illness had subsided, Martin had made some slight advance in Angie's favor. She had been left alone a good deal, and he had seized his chances. She also seemed to grow more cordial, and by degrees her cool reserve melted away. When Sunday evening came again, Martin, recalling Green-vale's social custom, resolved on a bold stroke, and calling early, invited her to join him churchward. For a moment she hesitated, knowing full well what would be thought of it, and then, as an extra shade of pink crept into her face, consented. When the bell began to call, she joined him on the porch, dressed in spotless muslin, a solitary rose her only ornament, and, as Aunt Comfort would say, "lookin' sweet enough to eat." And well might Martin feel proud, for no fairer maid ever blessed a lover's eyes. For two months now, though they had met often, no mention had been made of the

past. He had essayed it at first, but soon saw it to be unwise, and yet maybe that old-time illusion, like the sound of bells now calling them, had never ceased to vibrate in their hearts. We are moved by subtile influences, and memory is oftentimes awakened by the veriest trifle. The odor of a certain flower, a strain of music, the sighing of the breeze in the pines, even the croaking of a frog in springtime, will carry us back over a lifetime in an instant.

Only a few years, comparatively, separated the lives of these two, — very short to him, but long and weary to her. She had much to forgive, but like many another patient woman who goes through life silently forgiving an erring husband, so maybe had she now forgiven a lover's desertion.

And very sweet the church bells sounded to Martin, for now the fairest and dearest of all earth's womankind was walking beside him in a journey that was a tacit confession.

There were speaking glances exchanged between matrons and maids in that Sunday evening gathering, and whispered "I told you so's," while the white-haired parson searched for his

chapter. The congregation arose and sang as usual, Angie joining, while Martin covertly watched her, feeling proud. And when both bowed with the rest to receive dismissal, and then walked away in the balmy August evening, it seemed to him he ought to enclose her in one strong arm, lest she escape.

When the lane that crossed the Mizzy was reached, Martin halted. "Let's go down to the old red bridge," he said, and without a word Angie turned with him.

It was as secluded as well as a pretty spot; a group of willows shaded one end of the bridge and a pile of worn-out planks; below, the stream broadened into a wide pool and beside it grew sweet flag. It had been one of their old-time trysting places, oft visited to gather flag and watch the moon's reflection in the pool.

"I have a picnic plan to suggest," continued Martin, as they slowly strolled down the lane, "which is for you, Aunt Comfort, and Hannah, and the doctor and wife to join me in a day's outing. I know a little nook way up the Mizzy where we can go, and I'll cook you a real backwood dinner."

"I should be glad to go," responded Angie, with interest, "and I'm sure it would be delightful. I've heard so much about wilderness life this summer that I'd love to see how you cook in the woods."

But this picnic plan, while it promised much pleasure, was really of slight interest to Martin, compared to another matter; and while they discussed it all the way to the bridge, he was thinking of who it was that had scared David Curtis into delirium, and whether Angie was likely to resent his supposed interference in her affairs.

"I feel I owe you an explanation, Angie," he said directly,—they were seated on the old familiar pile of weather-worn planks. "As you may have heard, I have an inclination for trout culture, and one day it occurred to me that if I could buy the Mizzy swamp and falls of David Curtis at a reasonable price, it would not only be a good investment but make me a splendid fish-pond. I called on him, secured an option on it, and paid him something down. I found also that another party has been trying to buy him out, for pulp-mill purposes. Now comes another matter, which is all a mystery to me.

First, as we all know, some enemy of his visits his premises nightly. David must have received an awful shock, and, in the delirious fever following it, he accused me of plotting against him and in your behalf. It may and must be the result of a guilty conscience, but up till now I am innocent of what he charges."

"I've heard it all, of course," answered Angie, in a constrained voice, "and while it is painful to have a family skeleton become public gossip, I am relieved by what you tell me."

"I wish," continued Martin, hesitating, "I wish you would consent to let me do something for you in this matter. I know the whole story and how you have been wronged, and—and how you have gone on all these years, bravely earning your own way, and now believe me, I want to be your friend, and big brother, and help you to your rights. Won't you let me?"

He spoke with earnestness and deep feeling, every word of which vibrated with love and tenderness, but Angie remained silent for a moment. In fact she was having a hard struggle with her own feelings.

"I thank you, my good friend," she replied at

last, swallowing a lump, "but I can't consent — not now. I feel as Aunt Comfort does, that some day God will see all wrongs righted, and maybe mine, but I do not want them gossiped about any more than they are now. I thank you, though, with all my heart."

Then, as she turned toward him, her face ethereal in the moonlight, "With eyes kinder teary and lips kinder smiley," Martin almost lost his head in a sudden impulse to gather her close and whisper loving words.

For a moment he looked into those misty eyes, and then, lest heart conquer head, he rose from his seat. "I'm going to get you some sweet flag," he said, "in memory of the old times when we used to come here."

And when he — oblivious to the soft banks that soiled his boots — had gathered an armful of long, green shoots, and the two stood on the bridge, he selecting those with buds, while she ate them, throwing the stalks into the stream below, somehow there and then the old sweet dream crept into her heart once more, and all the years that intervened seemed to fade away.

What they spoke of now mattered not; the



"WILL YOU FORGIVE ME ALL THESE YEARS OF NEGLECT?"—Page 213



moon smiling in the pool below, the green flag shoots floating down the slow current, the whip-poor-wills calling in the near-by woods, were seen and heard as in a trance. When they turned from this spot, so fraught with tender memories, and Martin drew her arm within his, still retaining the hand he clasped, she made no protest.

When her home and the shading maples were reached, they paused a moment at the gate, he still holding the hand she had yielded and softly stroking it.

"Angie," he whispered at last, "can you, will you forgive me all these years of neglect but not forgetfulness, and let us begin where we left off; will you?"

"I will try," she answered gently. And as he attempted to clasp her waist, she drew away.

"No, not yet," she whispered.

When she entered the sitting room, Aunt Comfort was beside the window in her high-backed, wooden rocker, watching the moonlit meadows.

"Why, auntie," she exclaimed, "why haven't you gone to bed?"

"I was waitin' for you, my child," responded

Aunt Comfort, rising, and then, looking down into Angie's eyes, tender in the soft light, she stooped and kissed her. To Angie it seemed like a benediction. It was, but Aunt Comfort had been thinking of that faded blouse and rusty sword hanging in her attic chamber.

CHAPTER XXIV

VILLAGE GOSSIP

MARTIN'S return to Greenvale, his reputed wealth, and his pointed attention to his boyhood sweetheart, resulting in the two practically confessing how matters stood by walking to church together, made one of the waves of gossip now sweeping across that village. It was the most charming one and fraught with good wishes also, for Angie had many warm friends there, and her silent endurance of a well-known wrong, her self-helpful, guileless life, kindly sympathy for others' troubles, and sunny nature, had endeared her to all. None envied her the good luck that seemed coming her way, and if she had heard all the words of praise and good-will, now so freely uttered on all sides, it would have gladdened her heart.

Martin was also the object of much comment and some praise, and his every act was

known by all the next day. He had openly declared that he might settle in Greenvale, and had had men working all summer clearing up the valley of the brook that ran through his old home farm—now owned by him. A dam had been erected at a convenient point, and a small three-roomed house built at the foot of a knoll overlooking this valley. Whom that was for was a mystery, and when some one ventured to ask Martin, he smilingly answered, "I may live there and keep bachelor's hall when Dr. Sol gets tired of me."

As Martin had discussed plans and cost of a new dwelling, on the site of his old home, this was known to be an evasion, and the general verdict was that his action and house building only waited on Angie's naming a wedding-day.

There was another wave of gossip, less charming, which centred upon David Curtis and the mystery of his fright, and a fearsome tale it grew to be.


The story that Amzi had been seen in the woods above the falls, culminating in a searching party which made no discovery, removed

that possibility and left only the ghostly one to fall back upon, and that was explicit.

Few in Greenvale believed in ghosts, however, and yet David, when he recovered, declared he had seen a most horrible one. He described it as a gigantic Indian clothed in white, who had leaped out from behind the grist-mill and had felled him to the earth with one blow. When he recovered, he declared the monster savage stood leering at him, and that was all he remembered.

The hired man's account of the matter was different. He asserted that he had been awakened by a blood-curdling scream for help, and rushed out of the house to find David on his knees beside the porch, groaning as if in awful agony. He had neither seen nor heard aught of ghost or Indian, and yet every one believed some weird creature or else some night prowler must have been there.

Old Cy, however, added fuel to the ghostly flame. He had been the leader of the searching party, piloting them into dark ravines and around moss-coated ledges where the sun never shone.



"It's a ghost fast enuff that skeered David," he kept asserting, "'n' we ain't like to find it here. It's only them ez is guilty that sees 'em, 'n' David ain't done yit. I've allers held Amzi's alive, 'n' I don't give it up, 'n' when he comes back, I'd be fust to know it. Depend on 't it's a spirit hidin' 'round David's premises, 'n' he'll see it agin," and the old man smiled to himself, for he knew what no one else did.

Prophecy from such a man as old Cy, who found satisfaction in stalking about alone in the woods day after day, was to many almost the same as seeing a ghost themselves.


Another wave of gossip and one almost as astounding as the ghost tales was the story that Martin had bought the Mizzy power and lands above, was to erect a large pulp-mill there, and also would, as soon as he and Angie were married, bring suit against David for her inherited rights. The latter part, not unnaturally, produced even more satisfaction than the likelihood of Angie's obtaining a rich husband.

It is fortunate that little of this gossip reached the most interested parties, for it

might have detracted from the new happiness they were sharing, besides Martin had other vexations. To right the lifelong wrongs of Angie, even against her wishes, seemed a bounden duty. He had taken one trick in this game of justice by securing an option and preventing David from selling his property, for one year at least; the next was to take old Cy into the wilderness and secure proof conclusive that the hermit was Angie's father; that was trick number two in this game; the third and winning one, Angie herself. The second seemed certain, the third a question, and one that made his pulse leap unduly when he considered it.

Then again going into the wilderness meant leaving Angie for a month or more, and just now he wanted to see her every day if possible.

Another trouble and really the most serious of all was—suppose this hermit refused to leave his wilderness home and return to Greenvale at all? And if he did, would not the care of such a half-demented, misanthropic man, result in more shame and humiliation



to Angie than Martin ever dreamed? It was in a way a most selfish thought; for he knew if such a denouement came about, Angie would never shrink from her duty one moment. He could not if he would, withhold from her what he expected to find, after he proved it true and returned and yet — he hesitated.

He wanted Angie; her happiness and future were now more to him than his own, his money even, but so many pawns on life's chessboard, every thousand of which he would spend for her health and happiness, but was he not about to open a grave?

There were none he dared confide in, not even to the extent of a theoretical query; in himself alone rested the judge and jury of this momentous question, and well might he hesitate.

There are turning-points on life's highway where even the wisest are forced to close their eyes and let chance guide their steps onward.

CHAPTER XXV

A TASTE OF WOOD LIFE

THE apple orchards scattered over Green-vale were bending with ripe fruit, the farmers cutting rowen, maples growing yellow, and the date for all schools to open only two days away, when Martin carried out his picnic project. So anxious was he to please and surprise Angie, that he visited the spot selected the day before, taking old Cy along to help make ready. It was a pretty glade, some four miles up the Mizzy, reached by an old wood road, and here that stream, somewhat reduced, ran close to a moss-clad rock wall on one side, while spreading oaks shaded the greensward along the other. When the two men had cut away the scattered undergrowth, set up an outdoor fireplace of stones, and erected a small table out of boards they had brought, old Cy made a suggestion.

"Ye want a wigwam," he said, "to make it nat'ral like, 'n' to seem ez tho' ye was really livin' in the woods," and then to complete the effect, the two set about its erection. It was no small task to cut and fetch poles enough, set them up, and finally thatch the affair with small hemlock boughs, but when the conical hut was done, all that was needed to complete the picture was a lakelet near by, a canoe, and an Indian just landing.

"It orter please her," observed old Cy, scanning it critically, "'n' it'll give a sorter Injin tech to the spot."

"I'm glad we thought of it," rejoined Martin, smiling at old Cy's intuitive sympathy with his own wishes and wondering if all Green-vale had guessed them as well. He little realized how most of them already considered Angie and himself engaged, and only waited notice of a wedding-day.

But on the way back another matter was discussed—the cause of David's scare and its results.

"It's a wakin' o' his sense o' guilt," old Cy responded to Martin's inquiry, "'n' I

wouldn't be s'prised if they found him danglin' in the mill some mornin'. It's fear o' Amzi comin' back that ails him, 'n' I know it."

"But what scared him the night they found him raving?" queried Martin. "Do you imagine Amzi has returned and is in hiding?"

"No, not yet—not yet," answered old Cy, slowly shaking his head, "but he'll come some day sure's the sun rises, 'n' when he does, I'll be the fust to know it."

"But what scared David, do you think?"

Old Cy looked at Martin curiously. "Kin ye keep a secret?" he said.

"I will for you, old friend," answered Martin, earnestly.

"Wal, 'twas Nezer!"

"Nezer?"

"Yes, 'twas him ez hooked all the tools 'n' started the mill goin' 'n' finally played ghost that night. I've known it all long 'n' 'twas to git square fer jumpin' into a barbed-wire trap that old Dave sot fer the boys in the swimmin' hole. I heerd on 't next day, 'n' I've bin watchin' Nezer ever since. I tell you that boy's a deal like a hornet 'n' a bad

un to play tricks on. I've never let on, 'n' I don't want you to. Nezer scared the wits out o' old Dave that night, depend on't, 'n' he ain't done yit. It's a sort o' dispensation o' Providence, so ter speak, 'n' I'm willin' he should keep at it. Old Dave robbed me o' house 'n' home once, 'n' now he's gittin' his desarts." And old Cy's eyes twinkled.

Martin looked at him in admiration.

"And you have kept mum for a month, while the entire village was in an uproar," he said, "and even led the searching party!"

"Sartin, sartin," chuckled the old man; "I warn't goin' to spoil Nezer's game, 'n' I'm only waitin' fer him to skeer old Dave agin. He'll do it 'fore long, depend on 't. He ain't forgot jumpin' naked into a barbed-wire net yit, 'n' won't let up on Dave till he's druv him loony."

Then Martin laughed heartily as old Cy told how Nezer met his mishap, and how he had watched the boy lurking around the mill one night.

"I seen him crawlin' 'long like a cat in the shadder," he said, "'n' down under the

mill, 'n' perty soon I heard the mill start, 'n' the next, I saw Nezer come out 'n' sneak up the hill through the brush, 'n' I follered, not wantin' to be caught thar myself."

For a little time Martin remained silent, revolving a more important matter.

"Cy," he said, at last, "how would you like to go with me for a month's trip into the wilderness, where I took the doctor last spring? You have given me many a day's happiness when I was a boy, and now I'd like to return it. I'll rig you up with suitable togs, and give you a month's experience you won't forget. I want you also to see the old hermit we found."

Old Cy's eyes glistened.

"Ye won't be 'shamed o' me goin' 'n' comin', will ye? I'm sorter out o' place 'mong folks, ye know, I s'pose."

"I won't worry about that," laughed Martin, "and I don't know a human being I'd enjoy camping with any better than you. The fall season for shooting begins in a few weeks, and I'd like to see you face a big bull moose, or bring down a deer on the run. There's a few other wilderness experiences I'd like to

see you enjoy, and then we may discover another wild man. The doctor and I found a hid-away log-cabin we didn't get very close to, and who occupied it has been a mystery to me ever since."

All the rest of the way home Martin enlarged upon the fascinations of wilderness life, and so elated was old Cy at his coming treat that he scarcely slept that night.

The picnic next day, however, was such an enjoyable episode that it needs description.

To begin, the weather was perfect. A hazy Indian summer day, when the woods were so silent the tinkle of falling leaves could be heard, and the blue corn-crakes flitting among the chestnut trees, the squirrels chattering, and nut-gathering the only sounds. When the little party, crowded on to a three-seated buckboard, reached the forest nook, a surprise greeted them with an addition, unknown even to Martin, for some kindly hand had been at work, and the wigwam was a blaze of yellow, being completely coated with sprays of golden-rod, while a row of ox-eye daisies outlined the triangular door.

"It's old Cy's work," asserted Martin, while the rest were exclaiming in astonishment at the pretty picture. "We came here yesterday to get the spot ready, and he must have got up early to add the decoration."

It was quite in order that Angie should at least give Martin a special glance of gratified approval, but although he watched her covertly, while the rest were praising his efforts, none rewarded him. She joined, of course, with them in approving comment on the table, the fireplace, the spot selected, and especially the wigwam; led off in opening baskets and bundles and setting the table; watched with keen interest the methods of outdoor cooking, and when Martin had spread the chicken he had brought on the wire broilers, and set them in place before the fire, humorously inquired if salt was always omitted by back-wood cooks. She was like a child, also, in her enjoyment of the wigwam, and the picture of herself seated inside, while the men attended their culinary work just in front, was one that drew Martin's glances.

A picnic has been defined as a few people

finding an uncomfortable spot where they may eat, getting ready to eat, eating, and then returning to more convenient quarters, declaring that they have had a good time, and perhaps this one was much the same. There is some satisfaction, however, to an anxious lover in being "cook and captain bold" on such an outing as Martin had planned, and he made the most of his chance. He cooked the corn and potatoes just right, browned the chicken to a turn, and didn't spill the coffee. He was everywhere, and doing everything all at once, and when the rustic meal was served, received a loud succession of compliments from all the women except Angie, and one or two mild ones from her. If she was somewhat unresponsive, Aunt Comfort made up for it, and to an uninformed observer it seemed as if she felt herself the one in whose honor the picnic was planned. There wasn't an item in the simple bill of fare that she didn't praise, and Martin's skill in cooking received no end of it.

"I'd no idee a man ud ever know when br'iled chicken was done through," she observed when

all were seated at the table and the feast began. "I never saw one afore who did. But this beats any I ever tasted, 'n' how ye managed 'thout gittin' it smoked is the puzzlin' part."

"He has learned it from his guide in the woods," put in the doctor, pausing to butter a steaming ear of green corn; "that is part of their trade, and Martin catches on quick."

"You might open a cooking school in Green-vale and have plenty of pupils," added the doctor's wife, who also loved good things to eat; "I will attend."

"I am surprised you don't blush at so much praise, Mr. Frisbie," interjected Angie, with a laugh, "I should, I am sure."

But no reply came from Martin until the chorus ceased. "I am reminded of the advice a wise man gave me once," he responded then, "and that was, never blow your own horn, but if some one else is doing it, don't stop him."

It would have been quite in order at this picnic, when its feasting had ended, and the repacking attended to, had Angie, as guest of honor, devoted herself for a time to the host, but that seemed no part of this girl's desire.

Instead, the doctor was the target for her sallies, and the object of her attention, and had been from the outset. And when the time had arrived, when picnickers don't know what to do next, Angie insisted that the doctor escort her up the Mizzy, and show her the mysteries of trout catching.

It was almost ludicrous, for Martin had brought his rods along for this very purpose, and a plausible excuse for an hour's privacy with Angie, only to see her deftly escape him, and wander off with Dr. Sol.

"Hang on to him, Angie, if you meet a wild man," laughed Martin, as the two disappeared up the stream, "or you will have to come back alone," and with this Parthian shot at the doctor, Martin accepted his discomfiture without a frown. Better than all that, too, he now devoted himself to the elder ladies, as if their enjoyment of the day was his chief concern. He told them stories of wood life and the meeting with bears and wildcats, how camps were made, meals cooked, fish and game secured, carries crossed, rapids shot, and all the hundred and one experiences of life in the

wilderness familiar to all sportsmen. Then he again recounted all the features of his trip with Dr. Sol, the night call of the ogre-faced wild man, his hideous half-human, half-brute tracks, the finding of the queerly carved paddle knob, the lonely cabin with its ominous signal wire, and later the weird night visitor to the moonlit lake, when they were camped, and his supposed explanation in the finding of the strange hermit.

All this had been told before, but retold now in this romantic forest nook, with the stream chattering on one side, and the wigwam close by, it made a chapter of experience that held the three ladies spellbound.

Martin also had excellent descriptive powers, and the rare ability of making his hearers see and feel what he had seen and felt, and so entranced were they that the doctor and Angie's hour's absence seemed no time at all.

"I don't wonder you men go daft on wood life," asserted the doctor's wife, when Martin's recital ended and the two absentees joined them. "If it's all so full of mystery and romance, as you describe, it must be fascinating."

But the lowering sun said pack up and go home, although the little party felt loath to do so. The picnic had been a success, however, and Martin had been its hero to them at least, which is above the average. He was not crowned with laurel, though plenty grew about the pretty nook, but he received ample praise and a final word from Angie, which was some reward for his patient effort.

"I hate to leave this spot, and especially that wigwam," she said to him when the rest and their belongings were loaded and ready to start. Then this teasing and perhaps now contrite girl added, "May I rob it of the daisies?"

"Why, of course," he responded, leading the way back to it; "we built it to please you."

Angie made no response, but when she had taken all the flowers she could grasp in one hand, she laid the bouquet on the table, and selecting a tiny sprig of golden-rod, drew it into the top button-hole of his coat without comment.

And so ended the picnic.

CHAPTER XXVI

JUST A FORMAL GOOD-BY

FOR a week now Angie had been school-teacher again, and twice a day she walked the distance of almost two miles to and from school. The leaves were turning, the maples in front of her home already a glow of yellow, and the advent of autumn only accented the memories clustering around the old red bridge she crossed morning and night. Occasionally she paused there on her way home, looking into the slow-flowing stream and thinking of this sturdy young man with kindly brown eyes and earnest ways. In his presence she felt herself somewhat of a child, and yet one who could hold him in restraint with a glance. And he had changed so from the old days! Then a big, happy, quite harmless boy, now an almost stern man, and more like a lion liable to roar at any moment, and who must

be treated with due consideration. The old resentment at his silent desertion was also vanishing, and as she glanced at the pile of bleaching planks under the willow each day, and realized how only her cool reserve had kept him at a distance, so far her face grew rosy. And what was to be the outcome? Some day this forceful man would scorn her puny barrier, and what then? She could not always keep him at a distance; and did she want to? And could she say "yes" to a question she knew would sooner or later be asked? There would be no opposition if she did. Aunt Comfort would sew until blind to help get her ready for the all-important step, and then, left alone, would cry her old heart out in solitude.

But could she trust her very life, and all chance for happiness, in his hands, and desert the good old soul who had been mother so many years? It must come to that, she felt, for his adopting Greenvale as a permanent residence was unlikely. She was sure his trout-raising hobby was but a short-lived fad, and to content himself in slow-going Green-

vale for long was not to be expected. He had grown used to the busy world of a great city and back to it he must go or be miserable. She even doubted if he would remain there after snow came and the dreary monotony of winter began. And as she looked down into the dark, slow-eddying current, and thought of the white pall that would then hide it, and how even the sight of a snow-bird was a relief, then the sorrow, that all through life keeps pace with joy, touched her heart—and not so much her own as that of another, who had even less to anticipate!

She had little to look forward to. It was all alike—the same unvarying round of home life, night and morning; the long walk to school in heat, rain, or snow; the monotony of lessons so simple to her, so hard for the pupils; the goings to church to see the same faces each Sunday, and hear the same sermonizing there, to repeat it all the next week. It was a treadmill existence, without color or excitement, and yet even more so was that of Aunt Comfort, whose smile and word of greeting on her return each night marked it

as the only event of importance that day. Then all the years since that fatal morning when she, a scared child, had flown to Aunt Comfort; all the loving care, the self-denials, the makeshift to get along, the kindly words, the motherly thought for all her needs now returned, like so many hands extended in supplication, and seemed to impose a sacred obligation.

She knew what Aunt Comfort would say if asked. She knew what that good soul's waiting up for her and the kiss that was a benediction meant! But no, it should not be, and, as she turned away from the dark current, it was with a resolve to say "no" when the time came, and come what may, abide with and care for Aunt Comfort so long as she lived.

And that evening Martin called.

"I leave for the wilderness to-morrow," he said, when greetings had been exchanged, "and am taking old Cy with me." And then ensued a somewhat humorous account of how that unique old man felt about the trip and what he was likely to meet. It was rather forced, for Martin felt himself starting

upon a momentous expedition, and leaving Angie just now was also unpleasant. Then again, he sorely wanted to confide in some one, and yet dared not.

A secret is a burden, be it good or evil, and all the possibilities of joy and sorrow contained in the one Martin carried made it a double burden. In due time, and as usual, Aunt Comfort withdrew, and he was alone with Angie.

And now she too seemed out of sorts.

"My school has been troublesome to-day," she said, in response to his inquiry, "and the turning leaves always affect me in a peculiar way. I am positively unbearable all through the melancholy days," she added, affecting a laugh, "and I think my school noticed it."

Martin did, at least, and quick of intuition realized that even a hint of love-making now would be out of place. Then while Angie spoke of her school, and all its vexations, recalled the picnic and its enjoyment, he joined in occasionally in a half-hearted way, fully conscious she was only trying to entertain him, and be polite.

"You are not quite your usual self," he said at last, almost desperately, "and I am way down hill in my mood."

"You ought not to be," she returned, smiling at him, "you have a few weeks of camp-fires, bough beds, and wilderness life ahead, and I almost envy you. I'd like to look into your camp some evening and see you cooking again. Shall you visit that old hermit on your trip?"

"I expect to," answered Martin, feeling himself grow hot and cold, "but I wish the doctor were going also."

And now a strange fatality led Angie to ask all about this hermit—how he looked, lived, and acted, who he might be, and where he came from.

"I've thought of him so many times since the doctor told me," she added, after Martin had answered her questions as vaguely as possible, "and the more I think of it, the more pitiful his life seems. I wish I could send him something."

Then a new thought came to Martin. He had an old and faded picture of Angie, taken

at sixteen, with hair in curls; but now he must have a later one for a purpose he dared not even hint, and how to get it without exciting her curiosity was a question.

"Angie," he said after a pause, "please come into the parlor and sing some of the old songs for me."

"With pleasure," she responded, rising; "do you feel churchy again?" Then she led the way to the parlor, where an album lay on the centre-table.

And now a spirit of mischief all at once seemed to animate this clouds-and-sunshine girl, and the very song he had listened to outside the evening of his arrival — the plaint of "Sweet Camelia May's" love-sick adorer — was her first selection. Then came "The Quilting Party," and a half dozen other old-time love-songs, and Martin, just a wee bit love-sick, and conscious that he had best keep it to himself, sat and listened.

When she ceased, he rose to go. "Good-by, Angie," he said, extending his hand at the door, and as she took it their eyes met — his full of trouble and despondency, hers a trifle

wistful. "I shall carry the memory of your face into the wilderness with me," he added, glancing at the hand he still held, "and — and don't forget me."

When the sound of his steps had vanished in the still night, she returned to the parlor and sat down. Through an open window came the faint tinkle of leaves falling from the maples, down the valley the low murmur of the Mizzy falls, and from the sitting room, the slow, measured tick of the clock. She was accustomed to hours of solitude, her life was one of dull, flat monotony to which she was hardened. But somehow just now the parlor seemed like a tomb. Full well she knew that Martin had come to say more than a formal good-by. By sheer force of will-power she had checked it, as she meant to in the future. It was against her own heart-yearnings now, but it was her duty; and as she thought of the wrinkled face upstairs and the faded blouse and sword, and realized how her own young life and love were all Aunt Comfort had left, her resolution and sense of obligation grew stronger.

Once a less thoughtful girl, she might and no doubt would have brushed all duty aside in response to a lover's claim; now more mature duty came first.

For a little time she sat there listening to the slow — never, never, never — beats of the clock, and living over old-time memories. One by one they came back, and like vanished blessings, seeming the sweeter, and now this new insidious impulse that must be stifled. And as the little heartache grew apace, her eyes filled.

"Pshaw," she exclaimed at last, rising and brushing the tears away, "how silly. I am a woman now, and women are born to suffer in silence."

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE WILDERNESS ONCE MORE

NEVER before, during old Cy's unfortunate and hand-to-mouth existence, had so much delightful expectation entered as the morning he left Greenvale as Martin's companion, attired in new brown corduroy. The best of any pleasure is its anticipation, and the old man, now barbered into more human semblance, looked twenty years younger. Then the busy world they soon entered, the rushing trains, the crowded cities, the hurrying people, the hasty meals, the night on a train, were one and all so great a change from his simple life in Greenvale, that he almost lost his senses. His sleeping-car experience, and his first one, was almost ludicrous in its effect upon him.

"It sorter seemed just like bein' in a coffin 'n' clankin' right along toward kingdom come," he said next morning in response to Martin's inquiries as to how he slept, "'n'

every time the train rocked, I thought I'd got thar."

But when the border of the wilderness was reached, old Cy felt more at home, for forest lakes and streams had been his lifelong companions. He was somewhat surprised at the extensive purchases Martin made at the little village store, and especially at a complete suit of men's clothing with double sets of flannel underwear, but asked no questions. Neither did he have any idea of the real and ultimate object of the trip, and was not told until our old friends Levi and Jean had pushed the well-loaded canoes twenty miles up a broad stream, and the first camp was made. All that day old Cy had been like a boy in his enjoyment of this new wonder world of dark bordering forest disturbed only by the rippling stream, the cry of an eagle sailing over a mountain top, or the clatter of a flock of ducks rising out of a lagoon; and then, when the tent was pitched, supper eaten, and Martin was reclining upon his blanket and slowly puffing his pipe, he told the story of the hermit, and who he was suspected to be.

"The doctor and I had a trip full of unusual and mysterious experiences last spring," he said, "and it's only a surmise on my part, even now, who the hermit was. First we were visited by the wild man about whom I told you, then we came upon a secluded log cabin that might have been his lair and might not. A week later we discovered a human prowler at night, equally mysterious, and finally this hermit—a morose, harmless, old man, who had made friends of the squirrels and evidently was averse to our company. I have a suspicion he is the long-vanished Amzi, and if so, you are the only one who can tell, and also the only one whom he would be likely to remember. If it is Amzi, he is, without doubt, partially demented. But whether or no, if he recognizes you, his old-time companion, we have established a fact which I can use to bring David to terms. If it is not Amzi, no harm is done."

"An' 'twas fer him ye bought th' extra clothes?" queried old Cy, with keen interest; then adding, after a pause, with visible emotion, "Mr. Frisbie, how fer is it to whar he

was livin', 'n' kin we fetch it in another day? If it turns out to be Amzi, I'll jist squat down an' blubber like a baby. I'm sure on 't."

Martin smiled.

"I'm glad I brought you, old friend," he answered, watching his face and eyes that glistened in the firelight. "If it proves to be Amzi, you alone can reach his memory and maybe induce him to return to Greenvale." Then, as the astonishing effect such a return would have on that village flashed into his mind, he added, "I'd give a cool thousand for the chance to walk up to old Dave and say, 'Here's your brother Amzi; I found him in the wilderness.'"

"'Twould gin him a worse scare than Nezer did, 'n' I'd be willing to lay down 'n' die jist te see Angie git her rights. She's been robbed long enough."

"She will before I'm done with the matter," responded Martin, in his earnest way, "and it's for that purpose we are here to-night. But I must ask you to keep this to yourself when we return," he added after a

pause. "To no one in Greenvale, not even Dr. Sol, have I even hinted what I've told you to-night."

"Ye kin trust me. I'd sorter 'spected' all along how ye'd felt toward Angie, 'n' if ever thar was a girl worthy o' a good man, it's her."

A shade crossed Martin's face, for Angie's cool parting was with him still.

"How many days'll it take us to git thar," continued old Cy; "will it take long?"

"About ten days," answered Martin, after a pause; "it's a hundred miles, with some hard carries." Then he filled and lit his pipe anew, pushed the embers together, and watched the fire in silence, his thoughts back to Greenvale and Angie. It had been but little over three months now since he had camped in this same wilderness and on this same stream with Dr. Sol, and in that time what a change in his own feelings had come about. Then the soft voices of the woods, the laughter of running water, the whisper of winds in the fir tops, the song of birds had all sounded sweet to him. Then he was like the woodpecker:—

“Who lived in the hollow of a tree,
Didn't care for nobody
And nobody cared for he.”

True he had a blissful memory of old-time boyish love, also sweet and perfect, that could be recalled at will and lose none of its charm, but it was only a memory and held no heartache, no longing, no consuming desire to have and to hold its object for all time.

Then came the temptation to return to that remote village of his youth and renew the old fond dream if possible.

And what was the result?

He had returned to find Greenvale's scattered houses seemingly dwarfed in size, the streams he once fished merely rills, his early sweetheart, once so tender and confiding, grown to young womanhood, who looked at him with critical eyes, and beyond all these disappointments and changes, and more painful than all — himself forgotten.


And what had he accomplished in the three short months that seemed as many years?

He had spent a few hundred dollars on his trout-preserve hobby, renewed a few old ac-

quaintanceships, passed a dozen or more evenings with Angie, each increasing the sum total of his unrest, discovered how mean and miserly a human being could be and live and—that was about all.

His wooing of Angie had made no apparent progress; the fact that he had outgrown Greenvale's social and religious scope was painfully apparent, and all that he had won of value to himself, was the faint hope of a chance to right a great wrong by restoring his boyhood's sweetheart to her natural rights. When that was accomplished, he felt for a moment that the wisest and best move on his own part would be to return to the whirl of city life, and, in the grind of money making, forget Angie and Greenvale.

But resolutions are easier to make than to carry out, and when the fire had burned low and Martin had led the way into the tent and wrapped himself in his blanket beside old Cy, Angie's glorious eyes and all the temptation of her face, form, voice, and the sweet memory of old times followed him. Put her out of his thoughts he could not, any more than he could



close his ears to the murmur of the flowing stream close by. With eyes closed he saw her tripping to and from church or across fields, with sun hat hanging low, felt the light clasp of her hand on his arm as he had that night walking home from the old red bridge, heard her voice rising in the sweet melody of "Give, said the Little Stream," and after a long hour of these tantalizing memories, when he finally passed into slumber, a winsome face kept him company.

CHAPTER XXVIII

UNEXPECTED TROUBLE

BUT of that journey into the wilderness little need be said. It was like all such—a romantic, though at times somewhat tedious, following of streams, crossing lakes and carries, and camping when night overtook them. On the second day out old Cy obtained his first sight and shot at a deer, and, as might be expected, no harm befell the deer.

“I sartinly aimed fair enough,” he asserted in response to Martin’s laugh, “but the gun might ‘a’ wobbled a leetle. It’s bigger game ‘n I’m used to.”

He made amends later, for along toward night and just as they rounded a bend in the stream, there on the bank, with antlers held high, stood a noble buck looking directly at them. With a quick backward stroke Jean halted the canoe, Cy raised his rifle, fired, and

the deer leaped straight upward and vanished in the undergrowth.

"Never touched him!" exclaimed Martin. But with a "Not so, he one dead deer," from the more experienced Jean, he urged his canoe forward, and, sure enough, there on the bank a trail of blood led them a hundred rods into the forest and to the prize awaiting them.

"No deer jump that way 'cept he ver' bad hit," asserted Jean, in triumph, and as for old Cy, it was the proudest moment of his life.

The next day they came upon a jolly party of four fellow-sportsmen, housed in a deserted lumber camp on the shore of a small lake, and halted for the usual exchange of compliments, and finally they made camp and remained near them that night. They were a typical party, jolly and full of fun, and addressed each other by most unique nicknames. The leader, a stout, florid, genial man was called Lobster Face, the next, a thin fellow, was Herring Bone, a short dapper little fellow responded to Brownie, and the dude of the party answered to Dead Easy.

But Martin was too anxious to solve the

mystery that led him into the woods, to tarry long with this pleasant party, and early the next morning pushed on. It was four days after when they saw another human being, and one day's journey to the lake where he and Dr. Sol had found the hermit, when, just as Levi and Jean had pitched the tent and started a fire, two men paddled up in a canoe and landed close by.

Both were dressed as ordinary sportsmen, yet neither could be classed as a guide.

"We were about to make camp above here," explained the older, a man with short-cropped gray beard and keen eyes, "and, seeing your fire, we came down for company's sake. Hope we don't intrude."

"Not at all," answered Martin, pleasantly, and according to the code of all sportsmen, "my old friend and I also like company, and you are welcome to camp with us." Then, still following the code, he drew a flask out from the stores and passed it to them.

After this peace-offering they withdrew a few rods and began clearing a camp site. Later, when Martin and old Cy had disposed

of the broiled venison, coffee, and boiled potatoes Levi had provided, and lit their pipes, the newcomers joined them. And now ensued a polite word duel between Martin and the elder stranger, with each trying to obtain information without giving it. It was fruitless, as might be expected, for Martin was suspicious that these men were not the sportsmen they claimed to be; hence he gave no information and they were as reticent.

It is a curious and yet well-known fact that two men meeting thus, will, in a short space, form a usually correct opinion of each other's character and present plans and intentions. One may strive to evade, to assert what is false, and as the saying is, "pull wool over the other's eyes," yet it is usually futile. In this case Martin soon felt satisfied beyond doubt that these men were not here for sport, but on some secret mission they meant to conceal. They spoke of the abundance of game and where they had seen it, of the weather, lumbering interests, parties they had met, and kindred subjects, all the time striving to induce Martin to do more talking. At

last he decided to try an experiment on those who he felt wished to learn his mission.

"I presume, gentlemen," he said, "that you've been up the Moosehorn?"

The speaker of the two admitted he had.

"Well," continued Martin, in a confidential manner, "I was up that way last spring with a friend of mine who had never been in the woods, and one night we received a visit from a most hideous wild man. My friend saw him first and nearly died of fright, and later on I saw him glaring at us from behind a bush. If you go that way again, you may meet him.

"The next day," continued Martin, smiling at their sudden interest, "we hunted for this fellow's tracks, and found he was endowed with the claws of a panther.

It was true, and yet in an instant Martin saw he wasn't believed.

"Did you notice horns on him also the evening before?" came the query, in response to this astonishing statement.

"No," answered Martin, laughing, "nor tail either; but what I tell you is true, though I see you don't believe it."

For answer the two men looked first at one another, then at Levi and Jean reclining close by, and, rising, the speaker said to Martin, "Come over to our tent, won't you? I've something choice there I want you to sample."

"It was only an excuse to obtain privacy, and evident enough to Martin, but he little realized the shock that was coming.

"I am satisfied," said the speaker of the two men in a low voice, when the three had entered his tent, addressing Martin, "that you and your friend are gentlemen who are here on sportsmen's mission and for sport. We are on another and far different errand, but it won't do for your guides to know it for sufficient reasons. I see you mistrust us, and that is why I asked you in here." He paused, looked at his companion who nodded, and then continued, "I did hope to obtain some information from you, but see it is impossible until I make myself known. We are officers and are looking for a murderer who has been hiding in this wilderness many years. We have heard recently that he has a cabin on one of the Musquacook lakes, and we are bound that

way. Every guide who comes into this region is in league against us to protect this murderer, and for that reason I could not speak freely before yours.

Then Martin, listening, almost gasped for breath at this admission. This peaceful old hermit who taught squirrels to love him, and whom he believed to be Amzi Curtis—a murderer! Impossible!

"You are wrong, gentlemen," he said in a positive tone, "wholly wrong, and I know it. I found that hermit you are after last spring, and he never did or never would harm a fly out of malice."

Then he told, as if pleading for himself, what manner of man this hermit was, and beyond that, whom he surmised him to be.

"No, no, gentlemen," he said in conclusion, "this old fellow is a poor half-demented man whom my friend and myself are going to call on, and I know he is not the one you want."

But somehow his pleading and profuse explanation failed to convince.

"I don't doubt you believe what you say and are honest," was the response, "but I

still think this hermit, as you call him, is the chap we want."

And Martin, returning to his own camp-fire, felt his heart sink with a new dread sense of danger.

"Levi," he said, "do you know who those men are?"

"Game wardens, I 'spect."

"Worse than that; they are officers on their way to arrest our old hermit for murder."

Then Martin looked at old Cy, then at Jean, and back to Levi in silence, and with firm, set lips.

"Boys," he said at last, "it's a good twenty-hours' paddle to the Musquacook. We have starlight and no carries — what do you say?"

For answer Levi began to draw the embers of the fire apart.

"The sooner they think we have turned in the sooner they will," he said; "'n' then we can start."

But this impending danger to the poor old hermit woke Martin's curiosity.

"Levi," he said, while they waited, "these officers are on a wrong scent, I am sure, but

are after some criminal, no doubt. Do you know of any who have been or are now in hiding here in this wilderness?"

"I do," answered Levi, "but there's reasons why I don't care to speak out. I ain't shieldin' no murderers by keepin' mum. I'm just mindin' my own business, 'n' not tellin' things that might end in my bein' a mark for a bullet some day; that is all."

"Well," responded Martin, somewhat surprised, "I think I understand your position, and it's all right. I don't want to get you into trouble, you may be sure, or to give any one away; but at least you can tell me whether you ever heard that an escaped criminal was hiding in this wilderness. It won't go any farther, I'll give you my word."

And then Levi, much pressed, told this story:—

"I've heerd thar was one, a chap by the name of McGuire, an' he had the name o' bein' a bad man. I ain't sayin' this as a fact, only just what I heerd. He used to do smug-glin' years ago down country, fetchin' rum in from the Provinces, 'n' then Chinks hid in

coffins, 'n' all that business. Arter that, he kept a place up to Grin'stun where lumbermen could spend thar money middlin' quick on rum, cards, 'n' sich. They used ter say he got most on 't, but some on 'em made a fuss 'n' took the law on him, 'n' then he dropped back. The next I heerd he was up to St. Francis — that's on the upper St. John — 'n' runnin' the same sort o' a dive; 'n' then he shot a warden fer tryin' ter arrest him fer dynamitin' salmon on spawnin' beds, 'n' then he took to the woods. All this happened some years ago, 'n' thar's been a standin' offer of a thousand dollars fer him ever since. I ain't heerd he's been ketched, though."

"But have you an idea that the chap we found with a bell signal last spring was this McGuire?" put in Martin, eagerly; "did you think so then?"

"Why, I sorter guessed it might be," put in Levi, cautiously, "but I'd rather you wouldn't tell them wardens, if you meet 'em agin. It might make me trouble. I ain't over fond o' game wardens either, fer that matter."

Then a new light dawned on Martin.

"I won't give you away, Old Faithful," he said, "and not a hint to those wardens, you may be sure. They doubted my word just now when I was telling the truth, and I am 'agin 'em' as much as you are. We will beat them to the old hermit's home to-night, if our paddles don't break, and when you and I part company, you will be well remembered."

CHAPTER XXIX

A NIGHT JOURNEY IN THE WILDERNESS

FOR an hour Martin and his three faithful allies watched the other camp-fire from in hiding. At last it died down, the two strange men entered their tent, and, after another tedious wait, Levi crept over to it, returned, and in a whisper announced that they were snoring. After hearing this, it did not take long for the four to pack and quietly fold their tent like the Arab and silently steal away.

The bordering forest along the stream was a wall of almost inky darkness; its course was but a narrow, winding rift between these walls and barely outlined by the stars. Now and then a patch of foam, caught in some eddy, lay like a prostrate ghost in waiting, tall firs leaning over it, and, side by side, the two canoes, like two huge crocodiles slowly swimming, now crept up the stream. Not a word,

not a whisper even, from the four determined men, bound on a mission of protection over an unknown old hermit who might not, after all, deserve it. It was a dim theory and faith in a long-range guess only on Martin's part that led him forward on that all-night journey, and yet that was Martin's way. Once he formed a conclusion he never halted or turned back, but pushed on until he proved himself right or wrong.

And what a wild night journey that was under the stars and ever on and on into the black forest!

No use to turn back — no waiting, welcoming light ahead, but ever the same dark, forbidding wilderness, ghostly and spectral. The black current they faced, veered and twisted from side to side, ever disputing their progress; owls hooted out of swamps, loons saluted them with half-human despairing cries, when a broad lakelet in the stream was reached, while ever and anon from out the darkness, came the scream of a wildcat or panther.

Sometimes the way grew uncertain where the stream broadened in a swamp, and here they

poked into beds of reeds, or nosed into clumps of alders, at last to find the current again and enter the forest once more. Now and then they halted to rest, fill their pipes, and exchange greetings in whispers, for the wilderness at night ever awes and loud speech seems dangerous. And so on and on, hour after hour, each man patiently wielding his paddle, while backs ached, arms grew tired and eyes dim with watching, until at last a broadening lake was reached just as the gray light of coming morn drove away the darkness. With renewed courage it was soon crossed and there, in the same cove, and on the same sandy shore where Martin and the doctor had camped, the canoes were drawn out and the weird night journey ended.

"We have got to sleep a little, boys," asserted Martin, looking into the tired faces of the rest, and especially old Cy, whose hollow eyes looked ghastly. "I confess I'm well tired out."

"It wa'n't the paddlin' that tuckered me so much as the feelin' skeery all the time," responded old Cy. "It sorter seemed 's tho'

sum wild critter was like to jump out o' the woods any minnit."

But conversation was at a discount, and, without waiting for tent raising, or even cutting bough beds, each man rolled himself in his blanket and the sleep of utter exhaustion.

And what a picture greeted them two hours later when the September sun, now well up, smiled down into that rippled lake, blue and sparkling! Overhead a fish-hawk was circling; across on a tall dead tree-top sat a gray forest eagle; a flock of ducks paddled to and fro along the margin of a bed of wild rice, while just above and nearer shore, stood an antlered deer knee deep in the water.

Best of all, no sight or sound of aught human was visible.

The picture was so woodlike, so romantic, so perfect with the two canoes side by side on the sandy shore, kissed by the ripples, it almost brought tears to old Cy, unused to such.

"If I'd got to shut my eyes fer good," he said, after a long look with face upraised to where the eagle sat, "I'd like to do it right



"MEBBE GOD HAS CONCLUDED TO BE GOOD TO ME, NOW I'M GITTIN' OLD"

Page 265



now 'n' carry this picter with me into kingdom come. I thought I knew what bein' in the woods meant, but I never did afore. Mebbe God's concluded to be good to me now I'm gittin' old. They call me an infiddle in Greenvale," he added a little sadly, "but I ain't, 'n' I never go through thick woods when it's sorter shadowy 'n' still, but I feel jist as if God was keepin' me company 'n' I'd orter step light. Lookin' up at a mountain also 'fects me the same way, 'n' I jist can't help takin' my hat off."

And Martin, touched by the simple reverence of old Cy, felt a new admiration for him.

But a duty of protection and rescue lay ahead, and there was an immediate need of food. It did not take Levi long to start a fire, and while the slices of venison grew fragrant as they broiled, the coffee mingled its aroma with the resinous odor of the forest, and the boiling potatoes sent steam aloft, all enjoyed a vigorous wash in the clear lake water.

"I think we've stolen a good march on those rascals who doubted my word," said

Martin, as he peeled a potato, then, spearing a brown slice of venison off the wire broilers and dropping it into old Cy's tin plate, he secured another for himself, added, "they must have gasped for breath when they woke up and found us gone."

"They'll follow, fast enough," returned Levi, taking his share of good things, now that the need of haste was evident, "they want to earn that thousand dollars ez has been offered for McGuire. We've got a good six hours' start on 'em, even 'lowin' daylight paddlin'," he added, glancing at the sun, "'n' time enough to hide the hermit where they can't find him, that is, 'lowin' he's the man you want."

Martin looked at his guide in surprise. He had confided to him the object of his trip; what Levi knew of this McGuire's history he had imparted before that long night journey, but no definite plan of action had been agreed upon so far.

"I'm going to let you manage this affair," replied Martin, after a pause. "You know the woods, you know the danger, and what I want. If the hermit is the man I think, we

must keep him out of these officers' hands if we have to tie him hand and foot and carry him off bodily."

"I wished we'd got more time," returned Levi, thoughtfully; "we're in a sort o' pocket up thar, 'n' 'bout the only chance o' gittin' out is down the way we go in, 'n' that means runnin' right into these ossifers, sure pop. Thar's a small stream comin' into that lake whar he is, but ye can't work up it more 'n a mile 'n' it ends in a beaver dam. D—n 'em," he muttered a little later, "I wish we could start 'em up toward the Moosehorn 'n' the hut with the signal wire. That's one o' McGuire's hidin'-spots, I've a notion."

But time was flying, Martin uneasy to be off, and the moment breakfast was eaten, the smouldering fire was drenched with water to leave no smoke sign, and the canoes pushed off.

And now came an exhibition of woodcraft new even to Martin. Levi, always the last to get into his canoe, waited until the other had moved out, then, stepping into the water, reached back with his paddle and levelled

every track in the sand and smoothed down the furrows cut by canoe bows when they landed, then with a tin cup he threw water over them all.

"They may find somebody built a fire," he said, as he took his seat, "but they can't tell when."

And now forward once more into and up the slow-running stream, Martin and the doctor had ascended, as they supposed in pursuit of a wild man. It seemed longer now, for pursuers were hot after them. It lent vigor to their paddling, however, and when the quick water was reached, and they halted for a breathing spell, Martin consulted his watch and was astonished to find it not yet ten. He had been so keyed up with excitement, the night journey, the brief sleep and all, that he had lost sense of time. He had not even noticed the sun. It was reassuring in one way, for they must still be many hours in advance of their pursuers, and they pushed on with rising spirits.

For over two months now Martin had been slowly reaching the conclusion that this old hermit must be the long-missing Amzi. At

first a vague suspicion, then a probability, and at last — so many times had he thought of it, comparing and shifting all data and gossip, recalling the old hermit's looks and nature as he found them, with all reports, that now he was ready to stake his life almost that the long mystery would be solved and the hermit found to be Angie's father. There were other and stronger chords than curiosity. His memory of boyhood days and Angie — his more mature and deeper love for her now — the realization of how she had been wronged, and beyond these, a burning desire to teach that miserly hypocrite, her uncle, a lesson in common honesty and manhood, moved him to action.

And just ahead, shining in the sunlight, was the little lake across which might be the one who could solve all mystery and serve justice.

Martin could hardly wait, and, although weary by loss of sleep and long hours of steady paddling, when the prow of his canoe emerged from the tangle of alders and glided into the lake, he fixed his eyes on the thicket of spruce where the hut stood, and never lowered

them until his canoe bow grated on the sandy landing.

Then, leaping ashore, he halted.

"You had better go first," he said to old Cy, "the shock of seeing you may waken his memory. It's only a few rods up this path to the hut."

Half dreading, and yet longing to end the suspense, Martin followed his companion. Up the steep bank, among the thick-growing trees they crept stealthily until the stump-dotted garden opened into view, and beside it the hut. The fence was still in place, weeds and dried corn stalks filled the garden, and as old Cy opened the little gate and halted before the cabin, the squirrels frisked and chattered with sudden interest.

But the door was closed, and what was more discouraging, a bank of dry leaves had gathered at its foot. Cautiously, and with sinking heart Martin crept up, pushed the door open and looked in.

The hut was empty.

CHAPTER XXX

A DESERTED CABIN

FOR a few moments Martin stood looking into that deserted hut, at the narrow bunk on one side, the shelf-like table with its few dishes washed clean and piled together, the two rude stools, tiny stove, pots, and pans. Then he turned to old Cy.

"Our night paddle was useless," he said in a dejected tone, "the hermit's gone."

And absent he had been for many weeks, as their observant eyes soon saw. Not only had the falling leaves drifted up against the door since last closed, but tiny shoots of grass had grown in the pathway and the garden had been left undisturbed since midsummer. It was here that the long-continued absence of its owner was most in evidence. The ripened ears of corn had been picked clean by crows and squirrels, bean pods lay rotting on the ground, and a tangle of weeds covered the plot.

"There's one thing we kin do, anyhow," said old Cy, when the examination was ended, "we kin lay low round here 'n' watch them ossifer git fooled."

It is needless to say that his bubbling sense of humor was consoling to Martin just now, and the two returned to the landing where a consultation was held. It ended in a decision to cross the lake, ascend a tributary stream, and hiding the canoes, return through the woods and, as old Cy said, "Lay low." This was carried out, and, an hour later, Levi stationed at the landing as an outer guard, while the rest found good hiding-places.

They had another hour's wait, and then Levi joined them with the information that the expected visitors were just crossing the lake.

It was not really courteous conduct on Martin's part to thus play spy, but somehow he felt unkindly toward these minions of the law who doubted his word, and when they approached the cabin, was willing to listen.

"Guess the bird has flown," said the leader as he halted before the hut and glanced at the little bank of leaves. Then, pushing the door

in, he looked long, turned about, and added, "I wonder where those fellows are who gave us the slip."

"I've a notion we may have passed 'em below here," responded his companion, "and they'll show up later."

Then they ransacked the garden, returned and entered the cabin, and made a more complete examination.

"He's been hiding here a good long time," asserted the leader, appearing again and glancing at the vines almost covering the hut. "This shack's been built all of ten years or more."

"Well, did you ever?" he exclaimed in astonishment, as a squirrel suddenly appeared from behind the cabin, ran up to him, halted, and the next instant was on his shoulder. "Here, you varmint, git off," he added, striking at the pretty creature, who leaped to the ground chattering.

Then the two men looked at one another, for that frisking squirrel's conduct was a revelation.

"I'm not just sure it's McGuire's hiding-spot after all," asserted one.

"Nor I either," responded the other. "This hut's been built twice ten years, or I'm no

guesser; and McGuire wa'n't the chap to tame squirrels that way."

Then he glanced at the sun, now well down, and added, "We might as well camp here to-night and save trouble, besides there's taters and onions in the garden."

When the two had returned to their canoe. Martin softly whistled to his companions, and they also vanished into the woods to hold a consultation when secure from discovery.

"Wal," said old Cy, chuckling, "they've skinned us out o' a good camping spot 'n' now what's to be done?"

It was a poser, and Martin, seating himself on a fallen tree trunk, stroked his chin and reflected.

"They'll light out in the morning," he said at last, "and until then are welcome to the hut. I've no use for them. Think of a brute in the shape of a man who would knock a harmless squirrel off his shoulder!"

The fact was that Martin had conceived a sudden and really causeless dislike for these two men who were only doing their duty.

"It'll be dark 'fore we know it," asserted old Cy, glancing into the shadowy forest, "'n' it's a

good spell back to the canoes. Mebbe we better push on."

And push on they did, back to the concealed canoes, and a camp for the night. And later around the camp-fire a consultation was held in earnest.

"We are here to find that hermit," asserted Martin, after all surmises as to his whereabouts had been exhausted, "and hunt for him we will until snow flies."

"Amzi used tq have the same trick o' wanderin' off fer days," responded old Cy, pointedly, "'n' he'll be back here bimeby."

Martin smiled the first time in hours.

"You seem sure it's Amzi," he said, grateful for the assurance.

"Sartin I do, 'n' more'n that, he ain't dead ez I callate your thinkin'; I'd feel it if he was."

The camp-fire conference terminated early, for the loss of sleep was felt by all, and when, late the next morning, Martin crept out of the tent, Levi and one canoe were missing while Jean was busy cooking breakfast.

It was eaten, and Martin was getting uneasy at Levi's prolonged absence when he appeared.

"They've gone, bag and baggage," he asserted with elation, "I watched till I see 'em shove off 'n' leave the lake."

But this did not solve the problem of where the hermit was, and Martin was as nonplussed as ever. Immediate danger to him was removed for the present, but where was the hermit? They were in the midst of a wilderness hundreds of miles in extent and traversed by streams running toward every point of the compass. To go in search of this strange recluse was sure to be like hunting for the proverbial needle, and Martin realized it.

"There is but one thing to do," he said at last in a despondent tone, "and that is, stay around here with the hope that he may return. He has evidently been away from his hut many weeks, and therefore all the more likely to be back soon." Then, turning to old Cy, he added jokingly, "How would you like to go hunting for the wild man we found up the Moosehorn, just to kill time? There is another and more mysterious log cabin up that way that would be interesting."

"You kin go," responded old Cy, candidly,

"'n' let me stay here 'n' watch fer Amzi. I won't be lunsome, 'n' maybe he may come any day. I'd like to ketch sight o' that wild man, but I'd a good deal rather ketch sight o' Amzi."

"We might go down to the lake where we slept in the bushes and camp there while waiting," said Martin, thoughtfully; "he's likely to return that way."

Then Levi suggested that they take possession of the hermit's hut, since it had been left unlocked. But Martin said no to that promptly, and, as leaving the spot at all had obvious drawbacks, in the end they decided to camp in a little cove just around from the hermit's landing spot and there await him. To take possession of even his miserable hovel was against Martin's feelings, and more than that, while the guides were establishing a permanent camp, he and old Cy returned to the cabin, and tried to remove all evidence of the other men's visit. Like many who hesitate at no vandalism, they had used part of the stake fence for fuel, dug up and carried off many of the potatoes and onions, and left the débris of their meals to mould on the table.

"D—n," muttered Martin, as he looked at the desecration of this pitiful home, "I'd like to kick them, one at a time, from here to the lake and then pitch them in."

"No use gittin' ruffled," answered old Cy, "hogs is hogs the world over, 'n' always leave their tracks." Then he seated himself on a stump and chirped to one of the squirrels who frisked and chattered, and then leaped into his lap.

And now ensued a week of pleasant camp life, devoid of incident, but delightful to old Cy, and, as may be surmised from his method of life in Greenvale, where he was content to live alone in a hovel, work for Aunt Comfort part of the time and fish and hunt the rest, he borrowed no trouble and had few wants. If it rained, he remained under shelter; if it was cold, he kept close to the fire, oblivious to whether he had more than a day's fuel on hand, and as for clothes—well, if they covered his nakedness and kept him warm, why, patches were as serviceable as the original material. And yet he was honest and kind-hearted to a fault, loving his fellow-men—if in sympathy with him—far better than himself,

and keenly alive to the beauties of nature and not devoid of reverence for the Almighty. Beyond that and like Aunt Comfort, he had an abiding faith that all wrongs would be righted sooner or later, and everybody get what they deserved. And now he firmly believed that the long-missing Amzi would in due time return in the person of this old hermit; and meanwhile they had a chance to enjoy this hunter's paradise.

"The only critter I miss here is my dog," he observed at the close of the first day, when they returned to camp with a handsome buck and a dozen partridge; "I've sorter got used to talking to him when I'm content, 'n' he allus understands me. A dog's better 'n most humans fer company, 'n' ketchin' the drift o' yer feelin's quicker. Once a dog loves yer, it's allus the same—never changes, and ye don't have to keep warmin' it up. Me 'n' Amzi use' to be that way, an' ud be so now, if he hadn't gone queer."

To Martin also, now that he was forced to remain content, old Cy was charming company, and his cheerful optimism, keen enjoyment of wood life, and childish gratitude for

this, the one supreme and altogether glorious episode of his life, a daily source of pleasure. And, too, the old man transmitted to Martin some of his philosophic content and certainty that this expedition would turn out all right in the end.

And so the balmy Indian summer days wore on.

Each morning and night they visited the hut, lest its owner return unawares, and on these calls old Cy always had a handful of nuts ready for the squirrels, who soon recognized a friend, and invariably ran to meet him. And how short those halcyon days were, even to impatient Martin! They journeyed up the stream that entered this lake, watched the deer feeding in the woods, surprised otter, mink, and muskrat in their haunts, and by patient waiting saw the beavers at work on their dam. They caught a few trout in the spring hole that the hermit had located for Martin, and, when more meat was needed, killed another deer.

One week and then another of this matchless existence passed, and then one morning, as they drew near to the hut, there, sitting on the bench in front, hatless, coatless, with tangled white hair and beard, was the hermit!

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BIRTH OF NEW THOUGHT

THERE were a few in Greenvale who doubted the Reverend Jones's orthodoxy. Squire Phinney was one, Cap'n Tobey (who kept the village tavern) another, and who, while admitting the Bible was correct in asserting man should take a little wine for his stomach's sake, questioned the truth of Jonah's experience and the story of the deluge. This small coterie of incipient heretics, though attending church with semi-regularity, met as often in Cap'n Tobey's hostelry or Phinney's store, and held a little service of their own, where these Biblical stories were discussed, pro and con, and the seeds of doubt and scepticism sown. Some held that the Bible was all literally true, others that it was partially so, and a few, while neither infidels nor atheists, asserted that no part of it was to be believed except as it seemed reason-

able. The orthodox creed and the Reverend Jones's sermons also came up for consideration, and while the sturdy farmers sat around Phinney's stove on winter evenings, their heavy boots steaming on the iron rail surrounding it, chewing tobacco or smoking, the location and probability of the place of eternal punishment and the injustice of predestination, foreordination, and infant damnation were gravely discussed.

In time a few newcomers, with less veneration for the parson and more outspoken in thought, settled in Greenvale, and the nucleus of the Unitarian church society came into existence. There were social causes also that aided in bringing this about.


The first and most powerful, of course, was the growing doubt and lack of faith in the Reverend Jones's orthodox teachings. They believed he was a good man and meant well, but was mistaken, and that his clinging to a literal interpretation of some parts of the Bible proved it. They had gravely weighed Jonah's exploits, Samson's conduct, and Noah's ship-building, and found them wanting. Sol-

omon's domestic example was pernicious; David's morals worse, and Adam's shifting the blame on to Eve unfair. Then the unending repetition of God's plan of salvation and its reason, the glories of heaven, the agonies of hell, the nature of the devil, why he was created, how powerful he was, and all the long category of Calvinism dwelt upon by Jones year after year, had become tiresome, and the oftener they listened to it, the less they believed it. Then another factor carried influence. The village had taken sides for and against David Curtis when his brother disappeared, and the parson was on David's side. There were, of course, well known and selfish reasons for this, but they did not add to the Reverend Jones's credit for fair play and justice, and as time went on and the anti-David side grew in numbers, his influence waned. These causes finally culminated in direct action, the formation of another society, and the erection of a modest house of worship called the Unitarian church. Its following, however, was small in numbers. Some who had advocated it at first failed to respond

financially. The Reverend Jones, of course, attacked those who did with all manner of invective, calling them heretics and even infidels. The minister, who was called to lead this little band, found it impossible to live on the meagre salary paid, and what with Jones's opposition and lack of moneyed support, the movement failed, and the new church closed its doors. They remained closed until Martin Frisbie returned to Greenvale, and then one evening in Squire Phinney's store, like a spark long buried in ashes, the movement came to life again.

It was all due to an unusually severe sermon preached by Jones the previous Sunday, and now criticised sharply by the squire in the presence of Martin and a half dozen more, formerly identified with the Unitarian society.

"Guess the contribution boxes must 'a' bin comin' in light lately, the way Jones pitched into us last Sunday," Phinney remarked; "I've allus noticed when quarters and halves was skeerce in the boxes one Sunday, we ginerally git hell an' brimstun the next. It's as sartin a sign as tree-toads is o' rain."



"And does it work well and fill them the next Sunday?" laughed Martin; "if it does, you can't blame him. He's got to live somehow."

"That's so," rejoined the squire, "but the trouble is, them as has money to give here ain't skeered no more by bein' shook over hell—they've got used to it for one thing, and another is they don't believe in hell 'n' pitchforks no more."

"And do you mean to say you good people here doubt any of Mr. Jones's venerable creeds?" returned Martin, looking from one to another of the group with an amused smile; "I am astonished at such heresy."

"Well, ye needn't be," returned the squire, testily, "we ain't all on us asleep here all the time, 'n' if we had money enough, we'd have another church-goin' in no time. We tried it once, but it sorter petered out. Mebbe 'twas from lack o' brimstun preachin'. Arter all," he added after a pause, "mebbe Jones is right in his idee of skeerin' folks to make 'em pay. But I don't believe it yit, an' never shall."

Then others chimed in in support of the squire and a general arraignment of the parson's old-line orthodoxy.

"He's like a tree as is done growin'," asserted one, "'n' puts out no new shoots. He jist grinds the same grist o' thought over 'n' over agin, Sunday arter Sunday, an' ye kin tell what he's goin' to say the minnit he gives the text."

"I've outgrowned a devil with hoofs and horns," added another, "an' don't take no more stock in Jonah or the ark business. I don't b'lieve the Almighty is a Bein' any on us understands, 'n' Jones makin' out he knows His plans an' intentions, is all bosh. He's gin us laws ter foller 'n' consciences to obey, an' that's all thar is to religion, anyhow."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, gentlemen," asserted Martin, after listening awhile to these heterodox admissions, "I have a young friend by the name of Upson who is a recent graduate of a divinity school, an eloquent speaker of liberal tendencies and one whom I would like to assist — now if you are tired of Jones's theology and feel like listening to this young man, I'll

make you a proposition: circulate a subscription paper and obtain a monthly guarantee of sufficient money to pay him a living salary, then repair the old Unitarian church and make it habitable, and I'll pay the bill for that. I'll also subscribe toward the salary."

It was an astounding proposition, and may have come more from Martin's desire to install himself in Greenvale's good-will than to inculcate a new gospel; but that mattered not. Greenvaleites were not addicted to over close examination of gift-horses, and Martin's proposition was then and there accepted by all present. More than that, so ready was the soil for new seed that the requisite subscriptions were obtained in a day, and when he and old Cy left for the wilderness, a gang of men were at work on the long-vacant church that had been used as a storehouse for farming tools, and it was well on its way toward reconstruction.

As might be expected, this new movement caused even more gossip than David's ghostly visitor and consequent illness; in fact, Martin and his actions since his return had been a storm centre of gossip, and this last exploit sur-

passed all that had gone before it. It landed him on the top wave of popularity with the majority of Greenvale's citizens, of course, and only a few of the most bigoted of Jones's followers, led by him, dared speak ill of the innovation. He, as might be expected, was in sore distress over it and missed no chance to cry it down. He denounced it from the pulpit as a secret emanation from the devil, sure to undermine the foundation of faith and the true gospel, and in private lamented that he in his old age should be exposed to such an arrogant assault. He even enlarged upon the trite saw that the love of money was the root of all evil, and this young man must be ungodly, since he belonged to no church and had come here to flaunt his illgotten wealth in the faces of the sanctified.

"It's a hit bird as allus flutters, 'n' a stuck pig as allus squeals," remarked Squire Phinney, when told of the parson's lamentations, and as his homely philosophy fairly expressed the opinion of the majority, that is sufficient.

Angie and Aunt Comfort, of course, heard both sides of this discussion, and while the

latter discreetly praised Martin's public spirit, Angie felt it an unfortunate action. She was, as has been explained, abnormally sensitive to public criticism or notice of any kind. That reticence had been the basis of her own and Aunt Comfort's refusal to take any legal action against David Curtis, and now feeling herself — as she was — very much in the public's eye for many reasons, this last cause for gossip was painful to her. Another reason — and she would not admit it even to herself — was that it hurt her to have a few express spiteful and malicious opinions of Martin. He was nothing to her, of course, and she had firmly resolved he should not be, and yet deep down in her heart he was a great deal to her. Only as a would-be friend, of course, or one about whom a few old-time memories still lingered, and that was all.

He was absent now, he would doubtless return only to leave Greenvale for good again, when he found his quest of herself met no response, and yet to have even an absent friend who was known to be her suitor denounced as a heretic, a scoffer, and almost an atheist, by the parson, hurt her cruelly.

CHAPTER XXXII

AMZI CURTIS

AT sight of the hermit Martin quickly stepped into hiding behind the tree, motioning old Cy to do the same. This strange recluse was not a dangerous beast, and yet so momentous was the question of approaching him, and whether or not he would admit himself to be Amzi, that Martin hesitated.

"You go first, Cy," he said in a low tone after thinking a moment, "and I'll keep out of sight. Just walk up to him naturally and say, 'Hullo, Amzi,' or accost him as you were accustomed to, and if you take him unawares, the chances are he will admit that he knows you."

It was with nervous dread that Martin watched the denouement of this forest drama. For months now he had thought of but little else except Angie, and proving this hermit

to be her father, and thus obtain her rights. Now that the critical moment had arrived and the mystery was to be solved for good or never, well might he feel nervous. And as he watched old Cy leisurely approaching the cabin, he was almost breathless with suspense. Step by step old Cy drew nearer, now to the little gateway in the stake fence, now up the winding path among the stumps, until the hermit looked up and old Cy halted.

The critical moment had come. Twenty years had been bridged.

For a minute that seemed an hour the two looked at each other. Then the hermit rose, and for another — to Martin — breathless moment faced old Cy, motionless. Martin could see him quite distinctly, his shrunken features, white beard, all awry, scanty hair, long arms hanging listlessly, gray shirt wide open at the throat, and patched trousers. He was like a pathetic statue of old age gone to seed, and outlined against a log cabin, half hid beneath scarlet vines.

Now old Cy took a step forward, both hands extended, the hermit raised his, their hands

met, then up and down again and again in a hearty shake of old friendship.

The suspense was over and the long-missing Amzi found.

And now Martin, keeping out of sight, returned to his camp content to leave the two old friends by themselves, and while he waited he drew from a small hand-bag a flat package and opened it. It contained two pictures of Angie, one as a girl of sixteen with hair in curls, the other a maturer face, sweet, yet dignified.

"Well, little girl," he almost whispered, glancing from one face to the other, "I've found your father, but God only knows what we can do with him or how it will affect you."

For a long time he looked at the two faces of one who now held the key of his life's happiness, and then folding them carefully, put the package in an inside pocket and glanced around. The morning's camp-fire still smouldered, a thin film of smoke rose from it, vanishing in the overhanging fir boughs above. The open tent just back dis-

closed a confusion of flattened bough beds, blankets, boxes, and clothing. Two rifles lay side by side in one corner, in front one canoe half out of water on the sandy shore, while across the rippled, sparkling lake, and in a cove, rested the other with Levi and Jean casting for trout, — a collective wilderness picture which he never forgot.

For a half hour he sat in the mellow autumn sunshine, as if in a trance, and then came a rustling in the undergrowth and old Cy appeared.

"Well," said Martin, anxiously, "is he sane and all right?"

"Oh, middlin' so," answered old Cy, his face glowing with excitement; "it's Amzi fast enough, 'n' he owns it up, but he can't make out how or why I'm here, an' he don't 'low he's got a brother Dave 'n' a grown up gal, Angie. He's sane enough so fur 's livin' here, 'n' how he does it, 'n' all about the garden 'n' squirrels, but jist the minnit I shift back to old times, he either gets wary or don't rec'lect. He thinks I come here 'lone, too, 'n' when I come 'way, he acted worried for fear I wouldn't

come back, 'n' kept beggin' I would. It's a curus case, 'n' I can't make it out. He acts like a man woke up out of a sleep."

"Had I best call on him now," asked Martin, after a long pause, "or wait until to-morrow? He isn't likely to go off again, is he?"

"Wal, I dunno," answered old Cy, cautiously, shaking his head, "I dunno; we can't stop him if he does, I s'pose, an' all we kin do is to be keerful—mighty keerful. My idee is I best go back to him bime by 'n' stay a spell longer, 'n' mebbe eat with him. We've got to sorter connect him with us by his feelin's, I callate."

"I might go off with the guides a few days," rejoined Martin, after considering old Cy's "idee," "and give you a chance to renew old ties again."

"Wal, mebbe, though you might come round thar arter a spell, jist ter git him uster seein' you agin, 'n' then keep shady."

"Would it be best to show him Angie's pictures now or wait?" queried Martin, anxiously. "I've got them with me."

"I'm glad on it," answered old Cy, eagerly;

"I'll take 'em, 'n' when the right time comes 'll use 'em as a sorter clincher."

And so these two, sitting beside that smouldering camp-fire, discussed the difficult problem of how to bring back to sane thought and action a mind diseased by misanthropy and years of solitude. A deer, with every sense keenly alert, might yet be stalked, a wary trout lured from hiding, but here was a problem quite new and ten times harder to solve.

One false step, the crackle of a breaking twig, the motion of a moving body, would send the deer leaping away to safety ; but the forest held others, and what matter. It held but one hermit, and on him and his return to sanity and action lay the happiness and heritage of an orphaned girl.

"I am going to let you manage matters entirely and exactly as you think best," asserted Martin, after long consideration ; "you know him best, he was your stanch friend once, I brought you here for that very purpose, and now I'll not speak, move, or show myself until you say the word."

But the question of Martin's showing himself

to the hermit settled itself, for hardly had he ceased speaking when footsteps in the undergrowth were heard and the hermit emerged.

"How do you do, sir?" was Martin's greeting, as he rose and extended his hand cordially. "You remember me, don't you?"

For one moment the strange recluse looked curiously at him, then to old Cy and back.

"I remember you," he answered pleasantly, grasping the proffered hand; "an' the squirrels didn't hurt ye, did they? I tamed 'em."

It was like a child's answer, and it flashed on Martin that this recluse had drifted back to that mental state.

For a short time he glanced curiously at the camp and its belongings, smiling in a vacant way and then at old Cy. "You're going to live with me now, Cyrus, ain't you?" he asked plaintively. "There is room 'nough, and you can help me cut wood."

Martin sighed and turned away.

He had been in suspense so long, hoping for the best and dreading the worst; for two weeks his fears had increased daily, and now to find the long-lost Amzi, the father of the girl he

loved, a mental wreck and in his second childhood, was pitiful.

"It might be wuss," old Cy responded to his regrets later, after the hermit had left them; "he's childish now an' sorter wanderin', but mebbe his mind 'll come back arter a spell by coaxin'. I callate 'most any on us ud get that way livin' all stark 'lone this twenty years."

Old Cy, with his homely speech, kind heart, and "horse sense," was right, and Martin knew it. It was none the less pitiful, however, and that night as he, left alone with the two guides, sat by the camp-fire watching its glow and listening to the low wave wash of the lake, his thoughts flew far away to a vine-hid porch, the rustling of falling leaves, and a fair face with bewitching eyes. All that last evening with Angie, her willing efforts to entertain, how he stole the picture while she sang, and her cool parting words came back. He had lived over the old boyish illusion months ago beside this same lakelet; it had led him back to Greenvale and to a new ambition and unrest that spoiled his peace of mind. And now back again in this vast wilderness, with the stars twinkling in the placid

lake, it pursued him still and would not be put away. It had been almost four weeks now since he left Greenvale, the leaves were turning, and he was anxious to get back for many reasons of his own, — the new church movement which he had in a thoughtless moment offered to assist, the coming of his friend as its pastor, and his own hobby of trout raising. They were all ties of more or less strength, but chief of all was Angie.

The fire had burned low and both guides were asleep in their bark shelter when old Cy returned.

"I think ye best stay 'round a few days," he said, "'n' then go 'way a spell. Amzi is kinder gettin' fond o' havin' me round helpin', 'n' arter a few days things 'll come back to him, mebbe. I doubt we'll git him back to Greenvale, though, 'thout we fetch him back; he's that wanted here."

It was not a reassuring report.

For three days Martin passed the time as best he could. He killed a deer and sent half up to the hermit, who with old Cy was hard at work cutting and piling a winter's

store of wood. He added a few brace of partridge to this gift-offering later on, called on the two who were now living together, and talked as best he could with Amzi, and then, at the close of one day, as he stood watching Levi and Jean busy preparing their evening meal, he heard a canoe grate upon the sandy beach close by, and, looking up, saw the two officers just landing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

UNWELCOME VISITORS

FOR a moment Martin stood looking at these men in speechless astonishment. He had fancied them far away on their murderer-hunting cruise, and now they were back — and for what purpose?

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Martin, with the best grace he could; and, advancing to meet them, "have you found your man yet?"

"We haven't," answered the leader in a curious tone, "but we think we shall if we stay around here long enough." Then, glancing at his companion, he added, "Do you do most of your canoeing by night?"

"I do," responded Martin, laughing slightly, and not at all abashed, "if I want to make time and protect an innocent man."

"I presume you know," returned the officer, almost insolently, "that warning a suspected

criminal or aiding him to escape exposes you to arrest?"

"I do," answered Martin, firmly, "and also that arresting a man without a specific warrant and proof that he is the criminal wanted, lays even an officer open to arrest and prosecution. Now you have with you, no doubt, a warrant for the arrest of one McGuire, a criminal in hiding. I gave you, some three weeks ago, what I believed to be directions where you could find him. You doubted my word of honor as a gentleman, and came here. You found a cabin that had been vacated for many weeks; you remained in it over night, committing two crimes, trespass and stealing, and then went your way. The owner of this cabin is an old friend of mine whom I know well, and he is back again now. You can arrest him, of course, but at your own peril. If you do, I assure you, I am worth and will spend ten thousand dollars to land you in jail for so doing. Now, gentlemen, we won't waste words over this matter. Please consider yourselves my guests, pitch your tent here, and let us be sociable."

For a moment the two newcomers looked at one another, hardly knowing whether to be civil or not. The better impulse won finally, and when Martin, as is customary, proffered a flask, they drank to his good health.

"We do not wish to annoy any one," the leader asserted, when peace was restored; "my name's Scott, and this is my chum, John Smart. We did come here, and of course made free with an open shack. We don't doubt your word as a gentleman, but we have been up the Moosehorn and don't find signs of any path or hut you described, and that's the story and why we are here."

"You will be satisfied in two minutes that this old hermit is not your man," responded Martin, pleasantly. "He is a poor, old fellow, almost a child now, and my old friend you saw with me was his intimate friend years ago."

After the two officers had pitched their tent, cooked and eaten supper beside Martin's fire, they all gathered around it and he told the old hermit's story. The wild man's night visit months before was not omitted, and the hidden cabin, with its bell signal, was again described.

The two officers also proved to be decent men on acquaintance.

"I should not have taken that all-night paddle," asserted Martin, when his story ended, "if you had not doubted my word, and to-morrow, if I find it's wise to leave my old friend alone here with the hermit, I'll go with you up the Moosehorn and show you that cabin. It may not be occupied now, but it was then."

When morning came, Officer Scott proved himself worthy of respect by accepting Martin's word, and keeping away from the hermit.

"It will only scare him," explained Martin, "and we hope to get him out of the woods and back to Greenvale and his daughter. If we can't coax him to go, I am nonplussed, and we may have to carry him out. How he has contrived to live here winter after winter is a mystery."

The new plan of Martin's going away met old Cy's approval.

"Amzi and me is gittin' real chummy once more," he said; "we've dug his pertatoes 'n' packed 'em in moss under the cabin; we're cuttin' an' splittin' wood, 'n' smokin' meat, 'n' gatherin' nuts for the squirrels all day long.

I like it, and wouldn't mind stayin' with him all winter. He's got a couple o' bear traps set somewhar, 'n' to-morrer we're goin' ter tend 'em."

It was a pleasant picture of wood life, but it failed to relieve Martin's mind much, or show him a way to secure Angie's inheritance. It set him to thinking, however, on what would be gained after all by the return of this childish hermit to Greenvale, and would Angie be made the happier by it? It was a question, and one hard to solve. So far as the law went, a deed, and all necessary legal papers, could be signed and witnessed here. It was too soon to propose that now, but it must be kept in mind.

"I am going to leave Jean here to hunt for you and Amzi while I'm gone," Martin said to old Cy, when ready to depart with the officers; "he can get you one or two deer to cure for winter use, and I may decide to let you stay here after all. When the right time comes, show Amzi the two pictures of Angie and take good care of him." And with this parting injunction he and "Old Faithful," as he had sometimes called Levi, pushed off.

A canoe trip through a wilderness is at once romantic, laborious, and lazy. The waterways, of course, must be followed, and when a "pitch of water," as a rapid or falls is called, is reached, your craft and belongings must be carried around if ascending the stream. If descending and not too dangerous, a thrilling, and often risky trip is made down through the boiling, seething waters; leaping perhaps over sheer falls of two or three feet, dodging rocks, tossed upon white-crested surges, spun around in eddies, wet with spray, breathless with excitement, until the mad race is run, and you float calmly at last in the foam-covered pool below.

When one stream can no longer be followed, a long carry must be made often of many miles through tangled swamps where no path ever exists except tracks in the mud left by others, or a blazed trail over a ridge that only an experienced woodman can follow. When night comes, an opening in the undergrowth along the stream's bank must be cut to pitch a tent, or if fortunate, an old tote-road may be used. For days and weeks one may journey along these waterways, meeting all manner of wild animals

native to them, but no sign of aught human, except, perhaps, some vacant lumber camp lone and ghostly and half hid behind fresh growth. And so peculiar an interest attaches to these rude structures, deserted for years and left to rot, that one is almost forced to halt and examine them. They are all alike—a square log cabin thatched with saplings and now rotting boughs, with the door and window staring wide open like the big mouth and one eye of an ogre, a pile of rusting cans and débris on one side, the whitened skulls and bones of moose and deer scattered around and grinning a ghastly greeting to the caller. It is a weird, lonely, and somewhat grewsome spot, where man once lived in a savage manner, and as you peer around, guessing how long this rude home has been vacant, you instinctively feel that a human skull may greet you next, or a spectre appear from behind the hut.

The same mystery and invisible presence haunts your own temporary home each night, and every wilderness sound becomes magnified and fraught with danger. A squirrel leaping from a bough, a mink or otter plunging into

the stream, the cry of a loon on the neighboring lake, all have an ominous significance.

This mysterious forest influence was familiar to Martin, but now, as he journeyed onward, down-stream, up-stream, across carry with the two officers, and camping where night overtook them, it seemed to him that he had undertaken a fool's errand. We all ought to have an interest in the cause of justice, but to go in pursuit of an intrenched murderer hiding in a vast wilderness was, at least, not to his liking. He had, on the spur of impulse, and to prove his own assertions, promised to do this; but when the broad, slow-running Moosehorn was reached and night found them at the camp-site where he and Dr. Sol were visited by a wild man, he wished himself back with old Cy.

The spot had not changed in the months that had elapsed except that the North Branch was lower, and the summer's growth had sprung up where undergrowth had been cut away. The old tent poles still remained in place, the same endless procession of foam flecks came down the Branch, and the same low murmur of running water issued from above.

When the tents were up, fires started, supper cooked and eaten, a council of war, so to speak, was held.

"It was here," Martin said to the officers, "that a friend and myself first discovered that some mysterious human being or wild man was haunting this wilderness, and, as I told you, he gave us a good scare. Whether he was this man, McGuire, whom you want, I can't say. We found a peculiar secluded cabin late the next day, and if we make an early start to-morrow, we can reach it before night. I will pilot you to it, but more than that you must not expect. If this escaped criminal is there, you must act as you see fit. His arrest is not my affair, and I don't care to make it such. I've no doubt if it is your man, that the first one of us to approach his hut will be called to a halt, and, failing to obey, will meet a bullet. I've described the location and situation, and would suggest that you now decide upon a plan of action. A desperate criminal like this McGuire, who has kept in hiding for years, won't hesitate to add one or even three more murders to his list. Now knowing what you are likely to meet, what do you propose to do?"

For a moment the two officers considered the matter.

"We are here to arrest this chap," the leader, Scott, responded firmly at last, "and shooting is a game two can play at."

"True enough," answered Martin, laconically, "but with one shooter secure in a log cabin, the play part will be all on his side. I shall not mix up in it, as I said, but if you two feel that your duty calls for suicide—well, I'm sorry for you. I should hate to be called upon to bury you under a flag of truce in that clearing, and as for conveying you out of the wilderness if wounded—well, frankly, I can't spare the time."

It was such a matter of fact statement of the possible outcome that both officers laughed.

"I don't believe in tolling a bell until a corpse is ready," said Scott, "and I've found that desperate men sometimes wilt easy. We will wait and see how the land lays around this fellow's lair."

And that night Martin felt worse than the man who bought a white elephant.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAIR OF AN OUTCAST

It was mid-afternoon, and an impending storm hid the sun and made the forest unduly sombre when Levi caught the first sound of the stream where, months before, he and Martin had landed to follow a mysterious path. Its beginning, beside the bush-grown brook, was easily found, where twigs had been broken off and grass recently trodden.

"Here's tracks," exclaimed Levi, who had landed first, with paddle in hand; and, stooping, he added, "They's the wild man's, sure's a gun."


"It is he, fast enough," asserted Martin, who had followed, rifle in hand, and now also stooped over them.

They were plainly visible, and a group of them at that. Some faint on the patches of moss, and those close to the stream more dis-

tinct and showing the well-remembered claw marks. For full five minutes the little party of four stood looking at them with thrice the interest Martin and the doctor felt once before. They had journeyed a hundred miles to find a desperado, and the first signs of him filled them with forebodings.

"Well, gentlemen," almost whispered Martin, when the tracks had been well examined, "here we are, and your game isn't far off," and he led the way into the shadowy forest, up the narrow path only a few rods, and then he halted, for there, beside it, and nearly hid under freshly cut fir boughs, lay a canvas canoe, bottom up.

It was the one inseparable companion of man and his existence in this wilderness; and yet, had it been a crouching panther instead, it would not have awakened much more interest. It held all eyes one instant only, and then the row of four stalwart men glanced furtively around as if expecting a savage to step out from behind each tree. Only a moment they halted, and then with rifles at ready, and Martin ahead, they filed cautiously



up the narrow path, step by step, twisting around the dense thicket, along the frowning ledge, and up the defile to where the moose skull still grinned, and here they paused. Martin made no comment, but glanced at the officers, anxious to see how this ghastly warning was received by them. They looked at it in grim silence, then at one another, and then up the narrow, rock-walled path.

Once more Martin, as leader, moved on, and the rest followed.

Not a whisper from any, not a loud breath even, each step a slow one and catlike, and, parting the bushes with caution until the open glade came in sight, and just where the swinging stick crossed the path, they halted.

From here the log hut was visible, and out of its low chimney a thin film of smoke was ascending.

Martin looked at it a moment and then at his companions.

"There's your man, I guess," he whispered, "cooking supper. Do you want to call on him without notice, or shall I ring?"

It was the critical moment, and one Officer

Scott was not ready to meet. He and his companion had for weeks been searching this pathless wilderness for a man whose crimes they knew well enough, but of his temper, disposition, looks even, they knew but little. If the occupant of this cabin was McGuire, he was in a position to defy arrest or at least make it costly.

"Well," whispered Martin again, realizing their dilemma, "shall I ring?"

Scott nodded.

Then as all eyes were on this lair of a supposed murderer, Martin pushed the swinging stick forward once, twice, thrice!

On the instant, almost, and as the faint, tinkling answers reached the watching men, a shaggy-haired human face appeared at the one small window, then a slide was moved across it, leaving a narrow crack open.

The cabin's owner was evidently at home.

But it needed a brave man, indeed, to now enter this open glade, bristling with blackened stumps like so many fangs, and advance to the hut. Scott was evidently not that man, for he merely watched and waited, and Mar-

tin felt no cause to expose himself. One, two, three minutes passed, and the four still eyed the cabin.

And now Scott advanced to the signal lever and moved it again and again.

Only the faint bell sounds issued.

It was seemingly a case of either advance or retreat, but Scott did neither. Only a moment more he waited, then gave a loud "hallo."

It echoed through that silent wilderness and back from the cliff that frowned down upon the hut, but no one appeared. Again and again was it repeated, but the cabin door remained shut, the window slide in place, and the smoke still ascending.

"I've a notion to try a shot," whispered Scott, and, as no one answered, he raised his rifle, aimed at the cliff, and fired.

The ping of the bullet against the rock came back mingling into the report, but no one emerged from the hut.

Once again Scott lifted his rifle and fired.

This time he was answered, for now a gun barrel was thrust out of the narrow slit, then

a spit of red fire, and a bullet cut its way through the fir boughs above the watchers.

In an instant all four were prone upon the earth.

It was almost ludicrous, and yet the bravest of men would do the same.

"He's your man," whispered Martin, almost inclined to laugh, "but if you mean to arrest him, I'll stay here. I've no desire to head a funeral procession just yet."

But the face of Scott had grown fierce. "I'm a good mind to open fire on the shack," he said, "and see if that will start him out."

"I wouldn't," answered Martin, "you may kill the wrong man after all, and if I was that cabin's owner, and some one fired close as you did, I'd answer in coin. Bullets are arguments that merit the same answer. Your only show was to leave your gun behind, and call as a peaceful stranger might. You have closed the door to that, and it's now riddle that cabin with balls or retreat."

"I've a good will to send a few bullets through his roof," asserted Scott, angry at

being thus baffled. "I'm not the man to turn tail so easy."

It was bravado pure and simple, and Martin saw it.

"All right," he answered cheerfully, "only just wait till I get behind a rock. As I told you, it's not my business, and I don't mean it shall be. I've led you to your victim's lair as I promised, but I'm going back with a whole skin and soon, too."

Then somewhat crestfallen and yet helpless to do anything else except retreat, Scott led the way back to the canoes. And it must be noted that the time consumed in so doing was of the briefest.

The four camped together that night as indeed they had to, and when they parted ways next day, Martin felt no regret.

"That man Scott's 'bout like most o' the game wardens," asserted Levi, contemptuously, when alone with Martin, "and a cross 'twixt a loafer 'n' a bluffer. All he wanted was to earn the prize money, 'n' hadn't either sense or sand enough to do it. I've a mighty poor 'pinion o' most o' the game wardens,"


he continued, giving an extra push to his paddle stroke, "they're hired to keep laws from bein' broken, 'n' they fish 'n' shoot out o' season all the time.

"Then he's a braggart," he added after a pause, "'n' that don't count. Braggin's a good deal like a feller tryin' to lift himself by his boot straps. He don't git up any further 'n' looks ridic'lus."

But Levi, like most of the guides, bore ill-will toward all game wardens.

And now, as these two will not again enter this narrative, it must be recorded that not until years after did Martin find out who really occupied this inhospitable cabin on the Moosehorn, or what the ultimate fate of McGuire was.

For four days Martin and Levi journeyed onward in content together, as they had for many times before, and when at last the hermit's little lake was reached just at twilight, Jean's camp-fire gleaming on its shore was a welcome sight.



CHAPTER XXXV

HOME BUILDING IN THE WILDERNESS

WHEN Martin, aided by his guides, had made their own camp ready for the night and supper was disposed of, he started for the hermit's hut. He had learned from Jean that all was well with Amzi and old Cy, and now a call on them was in order.

The October new moon was bright in the western sky, the evening air cool and crisp, the leaves falling from the birches rustled beneath his feet, and as he came in sight of the hut, a cheery light gleamed from its one small window. He halted a moment at the gate, for out from this rude home came the sound of music once more. It was not a sad refrain now, but that cheerful old-time dance tune, "The Irish Washerwoman," and as Martin paused to listen a moment, it carried him back to his boyhood when he had cut

pigeon wings to its lively measures, and then clasped Angie's supple waist when "Balance and swing" echoed from the bare brown rafters.

And now five hundred miles away from those old associations, he was listening to it once again, twanged by her father on a jews'-harp!

It bore the same joyous mood as of yore, and, more than that, assured him that this strange recluse and old Cy were now quite content and happy. And why shouldn't they be and continue thus here? And what was to be gained by insisting upon changing conditions and almost dragging this poor old man back to Greenvale and to surroundings long since forgotten? It was but the same conclusion that had first come to him when he left here with the officers, now returning with convincing force. And what harm could follow? Amzi was content—the ties of his manhood were severed, earlier feelings dead and buried, he and old Cy, two fossils as it were, were happy together and could be of mutual help and comfort. They were, or could be properly

provided for during winter; old Cy, absolutely without ties in Greenvale, would be glad to remain here, and why not?

Then another and the vital object of his coming here occurred to Martin — Angie's rights. He had consulted a legal friend and found that if her father was still alive, David could be made to pay over to him or his child one-half the income of the property since he left. The property could not be sold anyway without Amzi's signature, and beyond that, Martin held a claim on it as well. More than this, Amzi would doubtless sign any necessary papers, and here were four good and reliable witnesses.

All this came to Martin as he stood watching the one little window light and listening to that old-time dance music.

And now he advanced cautiously and peeped in at the window.

A fire burned in the small stove, a queer tin lamp, a sort of can with a handle, was alight on the table, old Cy with a pipe sat on a stool, and the hermit, squat on his bunk, was still twanging his jews'-harp. A curious picture of backwoods enjoyment, unique, yet pathetic.

For a moment only Martin glanced in, then knocked on the door. A "come in," followed, and then he entered. There was no ceremony; old Cy rose and shook hands with him cordially, but the hermit remained on his bunk smiling.

"Well, I'm back," asserted Martin, "and how are you, boys? I see you are taking comfort."

"Oh, we're gittin' on famous," responded old Cy. "Ain't we, Amzi?"

Amzi nodded, still smiling. "We've bin choppin' wood," he said, "'n' Cyrus sharpened the axe on a stun, 'n' built a smoke house, 'n' we've got a lot o' nuts fer the squirrels."

"Back to childhood and for good," thought Martin; then aloud, "That's right, boys; now is the time to get ready for winter. How are the squirrels?"

"Oh, they're asleep now," answered Amzi, eagerly, "I'll feed 'em in the mornin'."

"Still the child," thought Martin, "and no thought beyond his daily life here, not even curiosity." For a little time he chatted, first with one and then the other, and then inviting

old Cy to come to his camp early next day, bade them good night.

Jean was asleep when Martin reached camp, but "Old Faithful" — Levi — still awaited him beside the fire. For a half hour or more Martin sat near it, maturing his plans.

"Levi," he asked at last, "how far is it to the nearest settlement?"

"'Bout three days' goin', 'n' mebbe five gittin' back," came the answer, after a pause.

"Well," continued Martin, with a laugh, "I thought of about everything when we came in but pens, ink, and paper, and those I must have as soon as possible."

"Well, I'll go fetch 'em," responded Levi, with ready willingness; "I kin go down the Allagash to Connors 'n' back in a week, mebbe, if you kin spare Jean."

"Why, of course," said Martin, ashamed of his own thoughtlessness; "I intended him to go with you."

Then, as he thought of the long trip these two must make, so easy going, but a steady up-current journey coming back; he realized how costly a lapse of memory might be. He

had prepared himself with legal advice, thought of and brought into the woods all manner of extra clothing, stores, and even medicine this old hermit might need if he refused to leave his hut; yet now he was helpless, without the simplest accessories of civilized life.

Then another thought came, and when morning dawned, he peeled strips of thin birch bark from an adjacent tree, and with a charred twig scrawled a brief letter to Angie. And of all the love-letters ever received by waiting maid, none were more unique.

"You must enclose this in an envelope," he said to Levi, when they were ready to start, "and rewrite the address on it." And taking the flat package, now tied with fish-line, Old Faithful pushed off and started on his hundred-mile journey for a quarter's worth of stationery.

When old Cy presented himself a little later, the two held an important conversation.

"I've given up the idea of taking Amzi back to Greenvale," Martin said at once, "and if you are willing, I'd like you to stay here for the winter and take care of him.

I've sent Levi and Jean to the nearest settlement for writing materials, and while they are gone we will make Amzi's hut more comfortable, and if you want Jean to stay here with you, we will build an addition to it."

"That's my idee, exactly," exclaimed old Cy, with delight, "thar ain't nobody as wants me 'round in Greenvale, 'cept my dog, an' Amzi does, 'n' that's 'bout all thar is to livin' arter all. I wish I had Bose here, though," he added, after a pause; "Bose 'll miss me."

"I'll come up in the spring," responded Martin, also delighted at this easy solution of a vexing question, "and perhaps bring Bose. In the meantime I'll take good care of him. I've also sent for meal, flour, salt, coffee, and a lot of other stores for you boys. I'll shoot you a deer or two while they are gone, and you can take a lot of comfort here this winter. I wouldn't mind staying here myself. There is game a-plenty, and when a warm day comes, you can catch a few trout through the ice." Then, as another matter presented itself, he added, "Did you show Angie's picture to Amzi, and what did he say?"

"I did," answered old Cy, with a shade of disappointment, "'n' it's curus how a man kin so forgit his own child. I said, 'Do you know who them picturs is,' 'n' he shook his head. 'It's Angeline, yer little gal growed up,' I said, but he kept lookin' 'n' said nothin'. Then arter a spell he handed 'em back. 'Angeline's a little gal,' he said, 'an' not like them picturs.' I put 'em away, kinder hurt, 'n' it was two hours 'fore he said another word. Then he come up to me looking sober like, 'Cyrus,' he says, 'was them picturs Angeline?' I told him they was, surer 'n a gun, 'n' showed 'em agin. He looked at 'em a long spell 'n' then sot down 'n' cried like a baby. I callate the old times is all comin' back piecemeal."

"Have you mentioned David to him yet?"

"No, I dassent," answered old Cy, shaking his head, "I dassent, not yit. He acted so curus arter that cryin' spell, sorter dazed all day, I dunno as it's best. If he's goin' ter stay here 'n' I with him, we'd best not meddle too much with his memory. He might go clean daft. He's all right 's fur as things

here go ; but thar's a gap 'twixt now an' the old days, an' we best not try to bridge it. If he once sot eyes on Angie or David, it ud all come back, 'n' mebbe drive him crazy 's a loon."

And Martin, trying to imagine how it would affect him to thus live in almost utter solitude for a score of years, realized that old Cy was right, and that this poor hermit's reason was almost gone. It was worse than pitiful, and yet it was a fact. And then he fell to thinking of his own duty, and how he must break the news to Angie and how she would receive it. He had dreaded this expedition for many reasons, and yet it had to be taken. In one way he could return with good news—her father was alive and content, if childish—that was some consolation. Old Cy's cheerful companionship might work wonders, and so Martin tried to find hope.

As for the business part of his mission, it seemed a trifle. Amzi could and doubtless would sign any necessary legal papers—Martin had them all in mind—a brief will in Angie's favor, Dr. Sol as conservator and administrator, with power of attorney, all

duly witnessed, and for the rest and any action upon these Angie herself must decide.

"I am going to let you manage this matter, as I told you before," he said to old Cy, after explaining this part of his mission. "You have been with him a week now; he trusts you like a child, and in your own way you can get him to sign the documents I want. I think now," he added, rising, "I'll play boy with you two for a week and build an ell on the cabin for Jean."

How that week of "playing boy" was passed — how Martin stalked and killed the deer he needed, and dozens of partridges and ducks besides, how the cabin's addition was erected and other improvements made, and how much Martin enjoyed this Good Samaritan labor — need not be specified. Amzi also seemed to grow fond of his cheerful voice, and obeyed him like the child he was.

There was also some pleasure mingled in, for the hermit, stimulated by the excitement of more company, seemed to grow more sane and like a mature man in thought, and told stories of his long journeys through the wilderness and meetings

with bear and wildcat ; how he had at various times ventured down to a settlement, and how curious people had been ; and, in short, he related bits of his history without connection.

There was some sport to diversify the work and care, for he led Martin and old Cy far into the wilderness where he had traps set, showed them spring holes in the lake that seemed alive with trout, and when evening came, he was as pleased as a child and as ready to produce his jews'-harp. He rapidly lost much of his misanthropic and surly demeanor under the influence of companionship, acted and talked as if he had known those about him for many years, and grew fond of them.

It all added an unexpected pleasure to Martin's labors, and when Levi returned with the coveted paper and canoe well loaded with stores, the hut was doubled in size, its walls enclosed in a foot-thick casing of fir boughs and moss combined, a roof of poles was erected over the door, the roofs of both cabins doubly thatched, two more bunks well filled with dry moss and leaves were made ready, and all possible security against a long, cold winter provided.

The legal documents were, as Martin expected, obtained with ease, money was given old Cy to pay Jean for six months' service, and with it ample directions for the hermit's care. Everything that Martin could think of he had attended to, and none too soon, for November had come, the wild geese were moving southward, the hardwood trees were bare of leaves, and ice formed in secluded coves around the lake each night. A two-hundred-mile canoe journey still separated him from civilization, and it was high time that he departed.

"I shall miss you going out," he observed to old Cy, when ready to start, "but it's go now, or get frozen in. You and Amzi are well provided for, however, and I'll be back in the spring."

"I'll miss ye the most," replied old Cy, wistfully, "an' I can't thank ye fer all ye've done fer me. All I kin say is take good keer o' yerself, an' fetch Angie back with ye when ye come."

And all the long days, ever pushing on, upstream, down stream, across lake and carry, and each night beside a camp-fire, that hope was a consolation to Martin.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HALLOWE'EN

DAVID CURTIS never recovered from the awful shock occasioned by that midsummer night spectre, stalking out from behind the mill. What it was he never learned, for Nezer kept his secret well, old Cy and Martin had never lisp'd their suspicions, and the spook of Scar Face remained a mystery in Greenvale.

Its effect on the ghost-tainted mind of David, combined with the gnawing of conscience, the daily fear that legal proceedings would be taken against him, and nightly dread of another spectral visitation, became more and more apparent. He had — thanks to Aunt Comfort's nursing — recovered from the first shock and brain fever. Aunt Lorey and the wife of one of his workmen now kept house for him, for he was willing to pay any price for company, but for all that he failed rapidly. Old age was also against him.

He could not eat or sleep, and long hours of each night were passed in nervous dread of something. The grist-mill was closed and had remained so since that fatal night, for every one considered it haunted ; but the force of long habit kept David pottering about the sawmill each day, and would as long as sufficient strength lasted.

Nezer also renewed his persecutions after recovering from the fright occasioned by his ghostly Indian masquerade, and though intermittent, they aided in the merciless retribution now pursuing David. These acts were all peculiar and mysterious, and quite like Nezer. With a strain of Indian blood in him, perhaps, he had never forgotten or forgiven that moment of agony when he leaped into a network of barbed wire, and, with diabolical cunning, meant to obtain ample revenge. Once or twice a week he visited David's premises by night and added one more mite to it. Tools were again taken from the sawmill and thrown into the flume or transferred to the unused grist-mill. Pieces of belts, bags, measures, and other fittings from there were hung on trees about the house. On two occasions the grist-mill gate was raised and

millstones set rumbling, to continue until morning, while David listened with fearsome dread, and then, to crown all, Nezer rigged a tick-tack over the house. He used a long fish-line for that, one end secured to a bush back of the house, with a lead sinker tied on at suitable location, another larger one fastened to the other end of the line, enabling Nezer to throw it over the house and secure it again, hide himself behind a fence, and dangle the mid-line plummet against the roof.

What the effect of such a regular tick-tack sound heard by one in David's state of mind at the midnight hour would be, can hardly be imagined. For the first two or three times he aroused and sent his hired man out with a lantern, but naturally that availed not except to stimulate Nezer to a longer enjoyment of his trick when the foolish search ended. Time and again did Nezer perpetrate this weird trick, always on dark nights, and after an hour of fun, secure his rigging for use again and sneak away. He was like an Indian in his methods, selecting nights just right and not too dark, stealing on to David's premises behind bush-

choked fences and keeping out of possible sight, listening with keen ears and eyes until sure no one was watching, and making his visits with foxlike cunning.

David Curtis had lived his life of miserly pinching and sharp scheming, forgetting every law of justice and honor in his grasping greed, had come to be despised by even his fellow church-members and hated by many others, and now, pursued by an uncanny fear, growing weaker day by day, was fast nearing insanity. What it was that haunted his premises he knew not. He crept to his work, a physical and mental wreck, dared not go into his own cellar or the dark basement of his mill, even in the day-time, and required his hired man to sleep in his room at night.

When the last of October and Hallowe'en came, he was little better than a doddering idiot from fear, and, sitting in his mill all day, watched his man at work, too weak to aid him.

And now came the climax of his punishment.

Hallowe'en had always been observed by the young folks of Greenvale with the usual

and time-honored ceremonies. Several parties were usually held, where apples, floating in tubs of water and secured if possible with teeth and lips of maid or swain, formed one amusement. If one was thus fished for and obtained, it was carefully pared by its proud owner, and its perfect peel, twirled three times around the head and dropped, must inevitably form the first initial of his or her future mate. Kissing games to accelerate these results usually followed, and later the parties broke up for other and more ghostly amusements.

Small boys carried jack-o'-lanterns through the village, or held them in front of windows; older couples or small parties made a late tour, hanging cabbages or paper bags containing onions or potatoes on door-knobs, and then, clanging the iron knockers, scampered away. Now and then some bolder lad, wrapped in a sheet, stalked through the quiet streets that night, and all manner of spookish pranks were indulged in. Nezer, as might be expected, had always been an active participant in these observances, and now, when the famous night drew near, he resolved to outdo himself. He

had kept his "Scar Face" disguise in safe hiding, and had in some way obtained a bit of phosphorus to rub on the mask around eyes and mouth. His plan, well matured, was first, and most important of all, to try his hideous disguise on his arch-enemy, David, and later on visit each house on the street. He knew the room David slept in, where a light was always kept dimly burning, and, as he had learned that the wretched man was too feeble to be again lured out, his only chance was to show himself at David's window.

It was late that spook-infested evening when Nezer crept, barefoot, out of Aunt Comfort's kitchen door. The night was starlit only, and, taking his mask, head-dress, and much-soiled old night-shirt out of hiding, and with the priceless bit of phosphorus he had kept in a spice-box full of water safely in his pocket, he scampered across lots to the grist-mill. Here out of sight or possible detection Nezer arrayed himself as Scar Face once more, and emerged ready for his star act, little realizing its outcome.

There were no occupied houses in sight of

David's. The Hallowe'en observers had confined their observance to the lower part of the village, the unceasing rumble of the falls, where they leaped into a deep pool, the only sound heard there; and David, with his sorely troubled mind, knew not, nor recalled what date it was. He only lived a wretched, aimless, hopeless life, an imbecile almost by day, and dreading each night. There was none to pity him or lift a finger unless paid. He would sit for hours with bowed head in the mill, uttering no word, lie sleepless on his bed, dreading lest he hear ghostly footsteps, or, if he slept, wake in the dead of night, expecting to find Amzi standing near. This last dread was the most potent of all, and the one he never escaped.

He had on this Hallow-eve sat up late as usual (since sleep was fearsome), and had been in bed but a few moments. The light was turned low, the steady breathing of his hired man in another bed was the only sound, and as David lay there in the dead silence of a still night, suddenly he heard stealthy footsteps outside among the fallen leaves.

Wide apart they were and slow, like a panther creeping up, yet each one nearer, — nearer, — nearer. Once they ceased, and then again he heard that faint crushing of dried leaves, almost up to the window close to his bed.

He sat up, his eyes wide open, while the sweat of deathly fear gathered on his pallid face.

And now, slowly rising above the window-sill, came first a group of feathers, all awry, then two small circles of glowing light, two hideous, ghastly eyes!

An instant he saw them, the next a more horrible mouth, with teeth alight, arose in view.

Only a moment did his fear-taxed brain withstand the awful strain — the next, reason gave way, and, with an agonized scream, he leaped from his bed and out of the house.

And Nezer was almost as badly scared.

CHAPTER XXXVII

NO MOURNERS

How Aunt Lorey and the hired man's wife were awakened by the latter's spouse that Hallowe'en night, how the two women, wrapped in quilts, sat in fear and trembling while the hired man vainly searched the premises with a lantern and later related how he was scared almost out of his wits by the delirious conduct of David, and how, when daylight came, the story spread over the village like wild-fire, was perhaps the most exciting incident Greenvale ever knew. For over two months now it had been known that David was in a precarious condition; his premises were by some considered haunted; the old scandal of Amzi's disappearance was revived and discussed, also what the outcome would be in case Martin married Angie and "took the law" on David. And so interested was the entire village now in the latest

development — the midnight and supposed insane flight of David — that the sun was scarcely up an hour ere his premises were almost black with people. Angie only remained away, but Aunt Comfort was in the crowd and Dr. Sol led the searchers. Nezer, a good deal scared, but holding his peace, was with the rest, but search where they would, no trace of David was found. Both mills were examined time and again, and every outhouse; small parties probed the mill flumes with long sticks; the pool below the falls was examined with poles and grappling hooks, while others scoured the woods, but without avail.

David had vanished like his brother, and the mystery grew deeper.

Suicide, of course, was his fate, or else death from exposure, for at his age and in his condition, no man could live long wandering demented and almost nude in the woods and swamps. This was the general verdict, and when noon came and the crowd dispersed, a few men and boys organized and began a more extended search.

It was three days before they found David,

and then his body was discovered in the middle of Mizzy swamp, miles away. And as if providential retribution led those searchers, it was Nezer who first received the shock of discovery.

* * * * *

"I s'pose we'd orter wear mournin' fer a spell jist fer the looks on 't," Aunt Comfort said the night after the funeral to Angie, "he was your father's brother, arter all, 'n' you're like to cum in fer suthin'. I wonder if he left a will?"

This combination of interest not only expressed Aunt Comfort's broad charity, but reflected all that Greenvale now cared for David Curtis.

No will was found, however, except the original one that had separated two brothers for life. Bank-books there were and bonds, and certificates of valuable stock as well, a total that fairly took Aunt Comfort's breath away. She and Dr. Sol and wife, with Phinney, were the only ones present when David's room was searched, and a tin deed box containing these valuables was opened.

In this box was an envelope also, and in it a

scrap of paper upon which was scrawled, "If ever you sell one foot of land, I will return to you in body or spirit." With this was a copy of a bargain signed by Martin Frisbie, and agreeing to pay David twenty-eight thousand dollars, for mill, land, and power, therein specified, within one year from date, or forfeit the two thousand dollars already paid, and in David's bed was also found that amount in bills.

Dr. Sol was appointed administrator by Squire Phinney, the hired man and wife were paid and dismissed, and the house locked. This, the business end of David's life, like his tearless funeral, was a mere matter of routine, and yet there were other and far-reaching outcomes of public interest. First and foremost was the question of inheritance. Angie, of course, the sole heir, would inherit in due time, and after legal preliminaries had been adjusted, and provided no other claimant appeared. Upon this, however, there was a divergence of opinion. Many still believed Amzi yet alive, some insisted that he must be (and that it was known to David), and a few were positive that

his ghostly presence had been the cause of David's first case of "fits," as a return on Hal-low'e'en had been of the final scare.

It was but justice, as all agreed, and yet it was a mystery as dark and uncanny as the hackmatack swamp where David was found. For three months many had considered his premises haunted, now this number was increased; and out of those who still scouted the idea of any ghostly connection, there were few who would have visited either mill or the big empty house after dark.

But the Mizzy falls kept on rumbling, the autumn winds swept the dead leaves into every nook and cranny of the premises, the leafless elms moaned, the loose boards of the old house creaked by night, and if Amzi's ghost came not, it seemed that David would be like to come.


A foolish will had wrought its worse than finite woe, a mean and miserly hypocrite had continued it, and dead, had — like a serpent — left his trail and impress upon Greenvale.

When the outcome of David's death, scarcely realized as yet by Aunt Comfort, was conveyed by her to Angie, it was told with bated breath

and as if a ghost might be listening. It was all so sudden, and so quite overwhelming also, Angie was stunned. All her life long she had felt a grievous wrong had been done her father, and she had been left to suffer for it. At times she had felt such bitter hatred of her uncle that his very name, and sight of his pinched face was obnoxious. At his funeral she would not look upon him, and when the "earth to earth, and dust to dust," finale came, only its solemnity impressed her.

We do not even admit some thoughts and feelings, and when those who have wronged us most pass down into their final resting-place, our lips must also remain sealed, and when Angie turned away from her uncle's grave, she would not say, "I am glad," and could not say, "I am sorry."

Neither did the fact that she was to inherit his estate undo the sense of wrong. It was not his will and wish that this was to be, he had not thought of her, or justice to her in life, and only the law's mandate now said so, and that left a taint on the heritage. He had wronged her father in the long ago, and had driven him from



home, had kept what was hers by right, and, in spite of public opinion, willingly saw her dependent upon charity and her own effort to earn a trifle, and now, in passing, had left her to stifle her natural feelings as best she could. But there was one spot of silver beneath the cloud, and that, the face of Aunt Comfort and the chance to reward her, was some compensation for all her self-denials. It was the first and about the only impulse that came to Angie when the tragic shock had passed away, and that night when the two sat beside their little round table recounting all that had been said and done in the past few days, this chance was Angie's only sense of gratitude. She had weeks before come to realize that any change in her own life would and must be impossible while Aunt Comfort lived, and Martin's self-evident hopes seemed doomed to fail. To care for the good old soul, who had been home and mother since childhood, she must, or forever despise herself, and although this legacy would remove the narrow and cramping poverty that had been theirs always, the obligation remained, and with Angie such a debt was sacred.

With Aunt Comfort it was otherwise, as might be expected, and when the evening had grown late and the fire had burned low, her résumé of the situation may well be quoted.

"I've allers b'lieved the Lord ud see justice done us all," she said, "and I b'lieve He has. He ain't like to bring Amzi back to life, but maybe He's gin David his just desarts. I don't exactly believe in sperits, yet it looks ez if the hantin' o' conscience had made David see one the night he was took with a fit last summer 'n' again now when he run off in the night. He's wronged your father 'n' you all his life long, 'n' if his sufferin' from conscience ain't a dispensation o' Providence 'n' his just desarts, I dunno what would be. Thar is one thing I can't quite figger out, 'n' that is, what made Martin Frisbie pay him two thousand dollars fer an agreement o' a deed o' the mills 'n' Mizzy lands, 'n' what he wanted on 'em. It looks curus, but I s'pose he'll explain when he gits back. It's 'most time he did, too; he's ben gone now 'most two months." Then she paused, looking at Angie and smiling benevolently. "It'll all be in the family, I s'pose," she continued, still smiling,

"when you 'n' Martin git married, ez I spect you will in time. Thar ain't no reason why you shouldn't, 'n' you will be middlin' well off in your own right now, if anything happens, 'n' fer that you ought to be thankful."

To Aunt Comfort this consummation seemed most natural and to be expected. More than that no thought of how that event would affect her own happiness came to her.

"Oh, you are not to be rid of me so easily," answered Angie, lightly, "and if you want to be, you can't, either. I wouldn't marry Martin or the best man that ever lived, and desert you now."


But Aunt Comfort only smiled again, serene in her faith of what must inevitably happen.

For a little while the two remained silent, each absorbed in her widely divergent line of reflection, while the tall clock ticked on, the evening breeze rustled the brown leaves about the house, and the fire burned low. At last Aunt Comfort, still smiling, began to doze, and Angie was alone with her thoughts.

And then back to the old days of her girlhood they sped in spite of all resolutions,

and once again the old memories returned. They were only fond recollections now, for he who had inspired them had passed out of her life for good, and could not now be allowed admission again. He must never even know she retained them. Her path of duty was clear, and beside the good motherly soul who had been all in all to her so long — beside her and for her she must and would live until the patient hands were folded at last and the wrinkled face would smile no more.

It was a duty of love and gratitude, ten times stronger than all the silly impulses once inspired by Martin and now sought to be renewed by him. True he was manly and tender, and somehow, absent, now was nearer to her than when present. He had shown repentance for his old-time neglect which, after all, was not surprising; and had almost begged for tacit forgiveness and reinstatement in her favor. She recognized that to live alone and without a man's protection was not easy for any woman, and yet so she had resolved and for a reason that seemed sacred.



Then she fell to wondering what kept him so long in the wilderness and why it was that unique birch-bark letter, scrawled with a charred stick, had been sent in an envelope directed by some one else. She had opened it with eagerness, and tried again and again to decipher words impossible to read. It contained naught except what all might read without question, if they could, and yet no missive ever received by her had been valued more.

His movements and plans in life were not her concern, of course, and not likely to be. She had renounced him for good and all now, and if he returned and pleaded his love, as she imagined he might, it would avail not. Her resolve was made and final—and yet Martin absent was stronger than Martin present, and the old sweet illusion hard to eradicate.

There are turning-points in life, when to choose the path of duty brings a heartache, and such a one now confronted Angie, yet she faltered not, and the gray head with its white cap and wrinkled face, now nodding just

across the table, still seemed her shrine of duty.

And yet — and yet —

The fire had burned quite out — only one tiny coal still glowed among the white ashes, the tall clock kept saying, "Never, — never, — never," the night wind still rustled the dead leaves in the dooryard, and life to Angie seemed like the clock's solemn voice.

Suddenly Aunt Comfort woke up and looked at her companion.

"Why, Angie," she said, "you've ben cryin'!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE

WHEN Nezer saw the white-clad figure of David Curtis burst out of the house and vanish in the darkness with a yell of fear, his ingrained love of mischief received a keen but momentary satisfaction, followed by a sudden dread of consequences, and instead of continuing his ghost parade down the street, he sneaked away over the hills and hid his Scar Face disguise. The next day he joined with the rest in a search for David, and when it culminated in Nezer's grewsome discovery, for the first time in his life he began to repent of his devilment. It was fear of being found out, of course, rather than regret; and yet its results were the same. That feeling increased hour by hour, and by the time the tolling bell sounded its solemn warning and the short procession



"LET'S SEE YOUR TONGUE AGIN"—Page 353

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100

started on its errand, Nezer had reached a state of abject misery. It seemed to him that he must be suspected by some one, and if found out, the dire punishment sure to follow was fearful to contemplate. He had read of lifelong imprisonment, and hangings, — the latter with eager interest, — and now it began to dawn on him that he might become the central figure in such a scene, and the thought was fearful to contemplate. He knew he had done something awful; in its results at least, and possibly the law would consider it murder.

He dared not confide in any one, so his imagination grew more terrible with doubt until he was sure hanging would be his fate if discovered. This dread certainty grew worse day by day, he could not eat nor study, and if a team stopped in front of Aunt Comfort's, or a man looked at him unduly, he felt worse. Then he began to have troubled dreams, saw himself bound hand and foot and carried to Riverton, where the court-house and jail were, then locked in a narrow cell, and twice he dreamed that he was standing on a scaffold with a noose about his neck. He began to grow thin and haggard,

and as Aunt Comfort would call it, "wofully peaked."

And now ensued a most ludicrous game of cross-purposes, for there wasn't an ache or pain suggested by Aunt Comfort that he didn't have. The comedy was of short duration, however, for the chance to dose some one was consolation to Aunt Comfort, and she acted promptly.

"Stick out your tongue," she said to Nezer, and a red and healthy specimen shot out of his face.

"Nothin' the matter with yer stummick ez I kin see," she ejaculated, feeling of his hands, "'n' no signs o' fever. You say your head aches, 'n' back, 'n' legs, 'n' you sartainly ain't eatin' nat'rally. Do ye hev cold chills up 'n' down yer spine?"

"Yessum," responded Nezer, eagerly.

"Feel dizzy?"

"All the time."

"Sick to yer stummick?"

"Yessum."

"Bad dreams, you say?"

"Yessum."

"Well, yer gittin' bilyus," returned Aunt

Comfort, wiping her "specs" on her apron, adjusting them and pulling one of the invalid's eyelids down. "Let's see your tongue agin."

For a moment she scanned it, and then added, "You want a good dose of thoroughwort 'n' I guess I'll begin with lobelia," and she started for the attic.

"It's curus," she observed to Angie, after Nezer had swallowed his dose of lobelia tea without a murmur and hastened out of the kitchen, "I never saw that boy so willin' ter take medicine afore, 'n' yet he ain't got no signs, 'ceptin' loss of appetite 'n' a *leetle* yaller round the eyes. Must be suthin' comin' on, though."

If there was, she took prompt, vigorous methods to head it off, however, and gave Nezer no rest.

At first he had dreaded discovery and dreamed of hanging, but, inside of two days, a persistent course of thoroughwort, catnip, opodeldoc, and lobelia, again varied by hot applications of burdock leaves and pepper tea, had made prison seem a blessed escape from trouble, and vinegar taste sweet.

By this time Nezer was sick in earnest, and

Aunt Comfort, somewhat scared, sent for Dr. Sol. He examined him, and after Aunt Comfort had recounted the remedies she had tried, he laughed.

"You've both had a good time, I guess," he said, "and the boy won't soon forget it, but there's nothing the matter with him."

Aunt Comfort was not convinced, however, and though Nezer began to eat again, she watched him continuously for more symptoms, and his dread returned.

For some years it had been Angie's custom to devote a few Saturday afternoons to outdoor excursions, usually taking Nezer along for company and protection. In spring they went after arbutus, cowslips, water-cress, and later for strawberries and other summer fruits. In autumn, when the woods were brown and golden, nut-gathering was the incentive, and then Nezer was indispensable. They had been out twice since Martin had gone away, and now when Saturday came again, she took Nezer and started once more, and never was the boy more grateful for the chance. To him—in spite of his mischievous nature—Angie was the

one person whom he most adored — almost a goddess, at whose shrine he worshipped. He had by this time become so reduced in spirits — thanks to “arbs” — that he felt the absolute need of making some one his confidante. He had, in fact, kept his awful secret as long as possible, and to no one but Angie would he or could he dare confess it. Like the young Indian he was, however, he always approached all things by circuitous routes, and when they were well away from the village this autumn afternoon, and while poking away the rustling leaves in search of nuts, he began.

“Do you s’pose ’twas a ghost as scared old David the night he runned away?” he asked.

“Why, no,” answered Angie, curious at once, and knowing Nezer never asked a question without an object, “there are no such things as ghosts.”

“Wus it Amzi come back ’n’ peekin’ in, do ye think?”

“No, that isn’t possible,” came the sober answer.

“Wus it ’n Injun, do ye s’pose?”

"There are no Indians about here," responded Angie, with aroused suspicions, and looking sharply at Nezer. "It might have been a bad boy, I know, dressed up as an Indian. Who do you think it was?"

Nezer, kneeling on the ground, looked furtively up at Angie, and then suddenly became absorbed in his search for nuts.

"I dunno who 'twas," he said, "'thout 'twas a ghost. Folks say 'twas, 'n' the mill is haunted; I wouldn't go thar arter dark, would you?"

Angie, knowing Nezer full well, made no response, feeling sure some admission would follow if she waited. For a few moments he pawed away the rustling leaves, and then looked up at Angie again.

"Say, Angie," he said, "won't ye never tell nobody if I tell ye suthin'?"

"No, Nezer," she answered seriously.

"Hope ter die?"

"Hope to die."

"Hope the buggers 'll carry ye off if ye do?"

"Hope they will."

Then Nezer, having thus sealed her lips, arose.

"Come with me," he said, "'n' I'll show ye suthin'," and he led the way into the woods.

For a quarter mile Angie followed him into the forest, until a dark thicket of hemlocks, choked with boulders, was entered, and here he dropped prone to earth beside one, and, reaching into a crevasse beneath it, drew forth a bundle, and, undoing it, held up the hideous mask and head-dress of "Scar Face."

For a moment he grinned at Angie, and then put them on. "Would ye be skeered now ter meet me arter dark?" he queried.

It was such a naïve and Nezer-like way of confession, that, in spite of the recent tragic event, Angie almost laughed.

"And so you are responsible for this awful happening," she said, as sternly as she could. "Now I know what has ailed you for a week, and I am glad Auntie gave you lobelia; you deserved worse medicine."

It wasn't uttered with convincing force, however, and when Nezer's face emerged from the mask, he looked both proud and relieved.

"I s'pose they'd put me in jail if 'twas found out," he said, as he hid the mask again, and led the way out of the woods. "You don't think they'd hang me, do ye, Angie?"

This time Angie had to laugh.

"Now tell me all about it, Nezer," she said. "I've promised to keep your secret, and I will." And when the border of the woods was reached, she sat on the leaf-carpeted ground and listened for an hour to Nezer's recital of his exploit.

And of the two, it is certain he enjoyed the telling the more.

"It was an awful thing to do, Nezer," Angie asserted when the tale was told, "and I'm glad it isn't on my conscience. If you don't quit moping around the way you have, however, and act natural, all Greenvale will guess your secret before long."

But Nezer was cured already, and when the lowering sun had started them homeward, he was almost hilarious in his joy. On their way they passed Martin's fish-pond, and here a surprise awaited Angie, for the long, narrow lakelet lay smiling and gently rippled in the

autumn breeze, a thin sheet of water poured over the well-built dam, and beside the pond, and sheltered by a tree-crowned hillock, stood a tiny cottage with wide veranda.

"It's fer old Cy," explained Nezer, with almost the delight of possession. "Hisn's so old 'n' tumbledown, Martin built this fer him ter watch the pond, so us boys wouldn't be ketchin' the trout. I wouldn't," he added, with astonishing frankness, "fer I ketched more'n two hundred on 'em ter put in, 'n' got ten cents apiece."

It was evident Martin had won Nezer's heart, and as Angie peeped into the pretty cottage, with its two rooms below and open fireplace in the front one, and thought what a palace it would seem to old Cy after his present hovel, somehow her heart felt heavy. He who had built this, out of kindly feeling for old Cy, was once her girlish lover, and would be now again if she so willed.

But it must not be—her resolution was made—her duty was plain, and to be followed at all cost to herself or him.

Only a few moments she looked at this

labor of love for an almost outcast old man, and then turned away in silence. Over the hills toward the village she led the way, pausing a moment at the bush-grown graveyard to place a wreath of ground-pine on a sunken mound marked by a low, white stone inscribed "Mother," and then kept on.

And Nezer, following close, and feeling it would be a privilege to kneel and kiss the hem of her calico dress, wondered why her face was sad, and she so silent.

"There is no need to dose Nezer any more," she said to Aunt Comfort that night, "I've found out what ails him; it's a troubled conscience."

CHAPTER XXXIX

A NEW LIFE

MARTIN's feelings, when he began the last day's journey to reach Greenvale again, were about equally divided between dread and anticipation. He had solved the mystery of Amzi's disappearance, — a bit of news sure to astonish Greenvale, but of doubtful effect on Angie's peace of mind. He was now in a position to secure justice for her, if she would permit such action, and yet he dreaded to draw the veil aside and tell her what he must. Of his own hopes, and the chance to pose as a benefactor, he gave no thought. His one and only real anticipation was the power he now held with certified facts to compel the contemptible David Curtis to an act of reparation. It was short-lived, for as Martin, the better to enjoy the scenery and learn the

latest news from Greenvale, rode away with the driver, on his seat, that worthy waited not to be asked what it was.

"I s'pose," he said, "ye hain't heerd how old Dave Curtis was found dead up in Mizzy swamp, hev ye?"

"Good Lord, is that so?" gasped the astonished Martin.

"Wal, 'tis fer a fact," came the answer, in a tone that showed how David stood in the driver's estimation. "He wus took with another fit the night o' Hallowe'en, and lit out with nothin' but his shirt on. We found the cuss up in Mizzy swamp three days arter, stone dead, 'n' stark naked. He was middlin' well done up, too, by briers 'n' fallin' over rocks, we callated, but thar wa'n't no tears shed on that account, 'n' no mournin' when we planted him, as fur as I kin larn. The mills is both shut down now, 'n' Angie gits all the property, I s'pose."

And this was that stage driver's condensed obituary of the richest man in Greenvale, quoted verbatim.

"But what drove him out that night," re-

sponded Martin, having Nezer in mind; "did he see another ghost?"

"Wal, we callate he did, 'n' that's what must hev skeered him. Thar's been curus things goin' on 'bout his premises the last three months, 'n' a good many b'lieve they're hanted by Amzi's ghost. It's my private 'pinion though, that old Dave's conscience had been worrying him lately since you come back. I've heerd," he continued, glancing at Martin, and anxious for information, "that you've bought the Mizzy property and was like to begin legal percedings fer Angie; leastwise that's the story."

Martin smiled at this truly Yankee method of obtaining news.

"I did obtain an option on the property," he responded. "But as for bringing any legal action, I've never said I should. I was willing to buy the Mizzy power and land, however, and pay David's price."

"Wal, mebbe that won't be necessary now," with another inquisitive glance; "they're all comin' to Angie now, 'n'—'n', we all callate it'll be plain sailin' now fur you."

But Martin made no response to this decid-

edly pointed assertion, and little did that Yankee stage driver realize how far away from "plain sailing" Martin's future course seemed to him. He had returned to Greenvale prepared to astonish the natives, confound David Curtis, and save Angie her heritage, only to find that the Great Reaper had robbed him of his opportunity. For David, he felt not one grain of pity or regret, and as for Angie, his first thought was,—was it now wisest or best to disclose the fact of her father's existence at all? It was but momentary, for come what might, it was Martin's fixed faith that all concealments would prove unwise in the end. His first plan had been to go to Angie as soon as possible after he arrived, and tell her all. She, first and foremost, should hear it. He dreaded the telling, however, for many reasons. Then its results on Angie's peace of mind and future was an all-important matter, and his own hopes as well. Beyond these what must or could be done with her father? It was all a most perplexing problem, and the solution of it must inevitably devolve upon Angie.

For half the slow journey to Greenvale, Martin listened to the driver's repetition of all the grewsome facts of David's fate, including the gossip that followed it, with interest, and then, more absorbed in his own vexations, paid scant heed until the doctor's home was reached.

A cordial welcome here and a good supper restored him somewhat, and after an hour of patient listening to the doctor's version of the all-important news, and still retaining his own, he rose and declared his intention of calling upon Angie.

"Oh, by all means," laughed the doctor, "and I wish you success. If you didn't pop the question before you left, you ought to to-night, and matters between you must be settled soon, as I need your advice regarding her estate. I am appointed administrator and have awaited your return before doing anything."

It was a pleasant send-off, but a proposal of marriage was farthest from Martin's thoughts just now.

It was late when he reached Aunt Com-

fort's, and she and Angie, always awaiting each other's wish to retire, were alone in the sitting room. The evening, a typical November one, was chilly, the stars obscured, and a cold wind rustled the brown leaves about the ancient dwelling. Angie, too, was in much the same mood as the night, and for many reasons that need not be specified, and the slow-ticking clock and low-burning fire, merely accented her feelings. Life had for many years been without much color for her, and lately, less so than ever.

And then came a knock, and he who had been absent for two long months, but oft present in her thoughts, met her when she opened the door.

His greeting, also, seemed unduly constrained and formal, and after shaking hands with Aunt Comfort, and inquiring after her health, he drew his chair to the fire and a pause came.

It is always a problem how either good or bad news can best be conveyed to its recipient, and poor Martin, after many days of

worrimment and dread, was now facing such. And the one person in all the world now dearest to his heart was the one most interested. For a few moments he watched the smouldering fire, the two ladies growing more curious each instant, and then he turned to them.

"You must pardon my abstraction," he said, "but I've only just arrived, and have brought you some strange news that will seem incredible, and I hardly know how to tell it. The stage driver has told me all that has happened here, but you two are first to be told what I have learned."

He paused a moment, looking first at Aunt Comfort, now wide eyed with astonishment, then at Angie, even more so, and then continued:—

"It's not bad news I bring you, and yet not as good as I could wish. You remember the old hermit I told you about, Angie; well, he is—he is still there and quite content and happy, and improving some. In fact, I found him more rational, and I left old Cy to care for him this winter. It was fixing up his

cabin that has kept me so long in the woods."

Once more Martin paused, for the dread secret wouldn't out, and a look of almost terror had come to Angie.

"He is all right," continued poor Martin again, conscious he was floundering, and feeling his throat growing husky, "and was — and was glad to hear from us all, and — and to see your picture."

And now ensued a dramatic scene, for Angie was on her feet instantly, with hands clasped and eyes dilated.

"What do you mean — who is he?" she almost screamed.

Martin also arose.

"Be calm, dear Angie," he said, "be calm. It is blessed news I am trying to tell you. That poor old hermit is — is *your father*."

For one moment she gazed at Martin with wide-open, terrified eyes, the next on her knees with her head in Aunt Comfort's lap, sobbing.

Then came Aunt Comfort's heartburst, and all the years of her kindly patient life of love

and hope were condensed into few words. For with hands upraised and eyes closed she whispered, "O God, I thank Thee for this blessed news and all Thy goodness. O God, I thank Thee!" And then she, too, was sobbing.

Martin turned away with misty eyes. He had heard prayers, but never one that touched his heart like this.

It was all over in less time than the telling, yet a lifelong drama was enacted in those few moments, and when Angie arose again — her face wet with tears and eyes still brimming — she looked glorified. She could not speak, but two hands were extended to Martin, and as he clasped them, the long ago of first love and the now of stronger love were joined.

"I can't thank you now, dear friend," she said, brokenly, "but I shall, never fear, I shall."

It was midnight ere they parted; when she again stood before the open fireplace where only white ashes remained, and glanced at the tall clock, she heard not its solemn voice, for a new life, a new joy, and a wondrously blessed hope had come to her.

CHAPTER XL

A CONFESSION

MARTIN's first return and wooing of Angie naturally interested all Greenvale, but the news of his discovery of the long-lost Amzi was, as he expected, a veritable bombshell. No one except Aunt Comfort and Angie learned of it until the next day, and then Dr. Sol, so to speak, was the one to sound the alarm. And no medicine he ever gave had quite such an electrical effect. Men driving on the highway were halted by others and told; women scurried across fields to neighbors' houses bareheaded to carry the news; Squire Phinney's store became a focal point where dozens gathered to hear the joyful tidings told and retold again and again, and Angie, on her way to school, had to give up and tarry for congratulations. And so cordial

were they, and so warm a spot did she hold in Greenvale's heart, that women insisted on embracing and kissing her in the street, and when she finally reached the schoolhouse, one of the committee was there awaiting her and declared the school closed for that day. She had walked there as her duty called, but she rode home, the cynosure of all eyes along the way, with most of her pupils following.

Martin also received an ovation wherever he went, and when he halted to describe the hermit home of Amzi, and tell the tale over and over again, as perforce he had to, men left their work, and women and children their houses, to gather close and listen. He was really the hero of the hour, and his efforts to save Angie her heritage, — now known to all, — his wisdom in not even hinting his suspicions of who the hermit was until proved true, and forethought in taking old Cy into the wilderness to care for him, were all a matter of comment.

By night the public sentiment had crystallized into a general invitation to all to meet in the town hall, and listen to Martin's telling

his story again in coherent order and in full. He rather laughingly consented, and for an hour held the unique gathering spellbound. At its close Parson Jones was called upon, as might be expected, and uttered a fervent prayer of thankfulness, and in it ascribing Martin's intuitions and actions, as a pertinent example of divine interposition, and when Amen was reached, called upon all to join in "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

It was rendered with unusual fervency, while Aunt Comfort wiped her tears away, and when the audience dispersed, Martin walked home with her. Angie was not present, for she was in a state of almost mental collapse, and for ample reason.

Collectively it was an exhibition of public sentiment and kindly feeling, the like of which could nowhere else be found. Green-vale had for many long years felt that a blemish rested upon it, and, like poor dog Tray, realized the stigma David Curtis was responsible for. He had met a just and well-merited fate, and the general belief was that conscience had driven him insane. Angie,

well beloved, had come into her rights, and at the hands of a long-faithful lover, who now hoped to become a citizen of that village. Aunt Comfort, too, was in a fair way to receive due reward for her unfailing charity and general benevolence, and all in all—though slightly bigoted—Greenvale stood ready, like the rest of humanity, to applaud and reward all goodness and condemn all vice.

But there was another, and to Martin even more interesting, conclusion yet to be settled, and alone in Aunt Comfort's warm sitting room that night they discussed it. What it was need not be specified, but at the close of Martin's plea for Angie's consent and speedy marriage, although she permitted his arm-clasp, she shook her head.

"No, no," she said, "not yet. Once you left me without thought or care, and now let us try being lovers again. I was forced to try to put you out of my mind and heart once, and I wouldn't care to live through another such experience.

"Beyond that, I have Aunt Comfort, and

no love can set aside my duty to her. She has been my mother since a child, I am all there is in life for her, and her care and happiness is sacred and must be to me so long as I live. You have brought to me also another duty, and that, my poor father. I shall not rest, or feel a moment's content, until he is here and under my care. You tell me he is almost demented, but contented where he is, yet he is very old, and to let him remain and die in that miserable abode is out of the question. I would start and walk to where he is, if it were possible, and he must be brought here before I shall know a moment's peace."

In vain Martin pleaded that marriage would be no bar to this double claim; her duty must and would be his as well, and that Aunt Comfort would be the happier for this consummation. It was futile, for all his specious pleadings and promises availed not. Duty to those already dependent upon her for happiness was her guiding star and watchword, and Martin had to yield and accept it.

She even refused to be considered as en-

gaged, and her reasons for it are worth quoting.

"A verbal bond has no strength," she said, "unless reason wills and the heart wishes. If you need me and I you for life, that need must hold us until death, or it is worthless and a delusion. Promises can neither add to, or injure it, and be it one week, one year, or a lifetime hence, it must hold and remain the same divine obligation. Beyond that, I shall value a faith and fidelity, given without asking, and bound by no promise a thousand times more than all the vows uttered by mortal lips. I did not ask Aunt Comfort to care for me a helpless child and not her own; she gave me home and love without it. She would not ask me to sacrifice one hour for her selfish needs, and yet I am ready, and shall if need be, to devote all my life solely for her in return. This and this only is true and unselfish love, and all that is worth the name."

Then they changed the subject into a discussion of ways and means to rescue her father from his wilderness abode.

"He has, so far as I could discover, forgotten his early life," asserted Martin, "and while he seemed disturbed and in a way almost touched by the sight of your pictured face, acted as if the past was a blank in memory. Old Cy he recalled well enough. In fact—and it was curious—his coming there appeared to strike him as perfectly natural, and in few days they became like two old schoolboys playing at keeping house. I'll wager at this very moment they are content and talking about their traps, the squirrels, and how thick the ice is on the lake, or how deep the snow is. They once were natural-born companions in outdoor sports and such ways of living, and now are joined enjoying the same again. I took old Cy along solely to identify this hermit, but builded wiser than I knew, and it turned out more than fortunate. I was also so sure I had found Amzi that I took in extra clothing for him, and before I left, sent our guides to a settlement for more provisions and needful articles. It was by one of them that I sent you that birch-bark letter, for I was

without even a pencil. We also repaired and improved the cabin; built an addition for the guide I left there for emergencies; they have meat and food supplies for a year, and when spring comes, I'll take you and Aunt Comfort to pay them a visit. To go there now is impossible, except to a hardy woodsman on snowshoes, for the only highways are locked by ice in that high latitude, and snow is likely to be a foot or more deep. I thought of all a man could to make your poor father safe and comfortable, and believe he is. I will do anything you ask, will take you and Aunt Comfort there when possible, and then you must judge what is best to be done. If old Cy's companionship has the effect I hope it will on him, he may be changed into a more normal state of mind, and ready and even anxious to return to civilization. The long years of solitary life have made him almost demented, however, and nearly obliterated even the memory of you."

Much more — already known — was related by Martin, and when the evening ended, a few words of defence for her own resolution

were uttered by Angie, and must also be quoted.

"You have rendered my poor father and myself," she said, "a service for which all you ask of me is no more than just reward. Some day it shall be yours. And now as partial payment I will tell you what has never passed my lips, and God's truth.

"Once and when a silly girl I grew into a strangely sweet illusion. I did not know what it meant then, but blindly believed it must last for life, and that you would seem and be ever the same to me. It was selfish, as first love always is, but I did not know it. Now I do, and that the only love worth calling such means self-sacrifice. Then you went away, and I tried to forget you. It was useless, for none can force thought or feeling either to come or to go. For years I suffered as all fondly foolish girls must, and in silence. It was like the Saviour's cross to me, and I helpless to escape its burden. In time and by trying to assume others' burdens, my own seemed lighter. I have never complained, for it was useless. I could

not will you back if I tried, and the only peace I found was in living for Aunt Comfort and my pupils. At first I hoped you might return some day, but finally forced that hope away. Other men and good ones tried to whisper love to me. It made no difference, for I felt no response. I certainly would have done so if I could, but I could not. It seemed to me God had willed me to live my life alone and for others, and even now I feel the same. Your finding my father, your unaccountable impulse to return here, then going back to him again are all a part of my fate. I may be wrong, but I can no more escape my sense of duty, and that it is God's will you should bring me this added one, than I could put you out of my heart long ago. My duty now seems first, and when that is performed, and no one needs me more than you, I will be yours until death parts us. I could not do otherwise if I would, and I would not if I could."

And when he parted from her, never before had he believed one woman could seem so priceless.

CHAPTER XLI

THANKSGIVING DAY

THANKSGIVING had always been the most important day in Aunt Comfort's calendar, and latterly the one most anticipated by Nezer. For many weeks previous to its advent he began to count the days ere it was due, and when preparations came, he was not only a boy ready and willing to do all that was asked, but one who seemed to be hunting for chores and chances to assist. First came the selection of the fattest turkey in the flock a few days ahead, and his cooping and extra feeding in due preparation for the grand event. In this occult matter Nezer displayed almost abnormal acumen, and could tell by the bird's strut and how he held his wings which one to choose. Chickens must also be selected and shut up, and here again Nezer's night visit to the roost and choice of fowls

showed discretion. The yellowest ripe pumpkin was picked out from the pile by him, and all manner of smaller vegetables as well. He cheerfully carried a big basket of good things to old Cy and others, and poor families a mile away for Aunt Comfort; he made no complaint at chopping wood, and when the big oven over the fireplace must be cleaned out, he was anxious to do it. By the time the all-important morning arrived he had reached a state of almost delirious excitement, and was usually underfoot all the time while watching the women folks preparing tarts and jellies and filling the many kinds of pies, to be deftly transferred to the deep oven on a long-handled shovel. To keep him quiet he was allowed to help, and Angie usually put an apron on him and set him paring apples or chopping mince-meat.

When preparations were well on and Aunt Comfort, who never forgot to go to church, hurried away for the brief service, then Nezer's expectancy reached its critical stage, and not even a circus coming into town would have tempted him out of the house. If company

came, his excitement was increased, and so keen was his anticipation that his best clothes were donned with cheerful resignation. The only rift within the lute of his perfect joy was having to wait so long, and, when the banquet was served, to be the last to receive his portion. He made amends, however, in quantity, for his plate had to be passed up three times, and he usually found room for two pieces of mince pie besides.

When the joyful day came again, both Aunt Comfort and Angie set about making it memorable, and invited a gathering that was likely to crowd their home to its limit. First, Dr. Sol and his wife, and Martin, of course, then his mother, sister, and her family, consisting of her husband and three children, from River-ton, as well. Then Aunt Lorey, whose ability to assist at and enjoy such an affair was even superior to her utility at funerals, was included.

"I don't know where we can put all Martin's family to sleep," asserted Angie, somewhat ruefully, when she and Aunt Comfort began counting their guests. "The out-of-town people

will need four rooms, and we have only two spare ones furnished."

"We won't worry 'bout sich trifles," Aunt Comfort responded; "we kin double up somehow, and Nezer kin sleep on the settle."

She had set about a celebration that *was* one, and the matter of crowding was a trifle of no account, and the event was one the like of which her ancient dwelling had not held since the joyous days of her youth. For three days the women folks were more than busy, and the store of good things provided seemed limitless. Twice the big oven had to be heated to bake all the pies, and again to hold the two turkeys and tempting spare rib, and Nezer's nose was nearly blistered while basting them. Martin obtained permission to add his mite, and he sent to the city for flowers enough to turn the whole house into a bower, and had Aunt Comfort known what they cost, she would have fainted. It mattered not to him, however, for he was in that state of mind when money seemed like the dry leaves of autumn compared to Angie's happiness.

Nezer was almost beside himself with joy

when the supreme day arrived, but when the somewhat citified Riverton party drove up and two pert and pretty girls about his own age alighted with the rest, he, for perhaps the second time in his life, felt scared.

Of the introductions, hand-shakings, and general efforts to make everybody feel at home and happy, nothing need be said.

Dr. Sol and family soon joined the party, and when formality had merged into the happy-go-lucky cheerfulness of such an occasion and the banquet was served, no pen can describe its all-around enjoyment or hilarity.

The climax of fun came in the evening, however, for Angie, always thoughtful, had invited a little party of her oldest pupils to help entertain Martin's nieces and nephew, and the house was turned almost topsy-turvy by "Blindman's Buff," "Puss in the Corner," "Groceries," and finally a game of "Button," in which even Aunt Comfort and Aunt Lorey had to join. The limit of rollicking fun was reached in this, when the latter was called upon to pay a forfeit by kneeling in the middle of the parlor floor and measuring six yards of

tape with Nezer. This performance produced shouts of laughter on all sides, but it is doubtful if Nezer enjoyed it.

There was one slightly ludicrous incident, however, for Martin's mother, who was somewhat deaf and had somehow understood that her son and Angie were engaged, went to her at the close of the evening and offered congratulations in an unnecessarily loud tone. Her intent was kindness itself, but it brought a blush and almost tears to Angie, and no one informed the old lady to the contrary. Neither did any one consider it needful to do so, or that the outcome was anything but a foregone conclusion.

And so it was, for there are some adjustments in life so absolutely compatible and so evidently in harmony with the law and sequence of events, that no will can stem the current. Happiness and a union with the man Angie's heart had never once swerved from, were forcing themselves upon her, and with her will or against her will, no alternative was possible. It may be called divine law or the law of natural selection — no matter; it is one and the same, and a power that has

covered "this dear old world, this queer old world," with countless happy homes, and filled its isles and fields and groves with joy supreme and the sweet rippling laughter of children. Love was hers by that same divine right, happiness for others meant her own, and what was hers she could not escape, even if she willed. More than that, the self-sacrificing impulses of a nature few men can either understand or appreciate controlled her and forced adoration.

Something of this was voiced by Aunt Comfort that night when the guests had been packed away and she and Angie were alone.

"I hain't spoken on 't afore," observed Aunt Comfort, "but I hope you an' Martin won't put off gettin' married too long. Thar ain't no need on 't now, and yer both old 'nough, 'n' I'd like ter see ye happy, ez I b'lieve ye will be, an' then thar's property reasons. Ye mustn't expect Dr. Sol's goin' ter look arter them matters now that yer nat'ral protector's come back."

"Why, we are not even engaged yet," answered Angie, with emphasis, "and I told him

I wouldn't be so long as you need me, as I know you do."

"Why, Angie, I'm s'prised," came the somewhat severe answer. "I don't need ye half so much as ye do him, and ye've both on ye waited long enough. If ye want to make me happy, ye must consider my wishes in this matter, an' I won't be happy till the day is sot 'n' I've seen ye two made one. I ain't allers goin' to stay 'round here, 'n' then thar's yer father. How do ye callate to take keer o' him alone in the world 'n' 'thout a man?"

It was a different viewpoint and one Angie had not considered. To her, duty seemed to live singly and do for those dependent, without dividing her own thought and love, or assuming wifely cares,—in short to get along without a man.

"I am not anxious to be married," she said firmly, after duly weighing what Aunt Comfort had said. "It is a serious step, and if Martin cares for me, it won't hurt him to wait a few years. I have grown well used to a single life, and am quite content without him. As for property, why, the mills and Mizzy lands won't run

away, and you and I have got along very well so far. Besides, there's my father, as you say, only your idea of my duty and his need is different from mine. Martin is going to take you and me to him in the spring, he says."

Then Aunt Comfort laughed, for this naive admission of woman's dependence on man was ludicrous.

"Why, you goose," she said, "if you 'n' Martin was married, thar wouldn't be no need o' my goin', 'n' ez fer my settin' foot in one o' them topply canoes they tell 'bout, I wouldn't do it fer a farm."

CHAPTER XLII

A CHRISTMAS PRESENT

LIKE a wise man, Martin made no effort to change Angie's mind, but the path between the doctor's house and her home was kept free from snow, and seldom an evening passed when he did not use it. He made himself needful to her in many ways also, one of which was to be in front of her home each morning in time to convey her to school and back again each night.

"You have walked long enough," he said, when she protested that people would consider them engaged, "and now you have got to ride, whether you want to or not. As for what folks will say, I want them to consider us engaged, for I do." He pleaded with her until she consented to resign her school at Christmas, and then hurried away to tell Squire Phinney, to

have another teacher engaged, and once a week a well-packed box of cut flowers was left at her dwelling by the stage driver. Martin also conferred with Aunt Comfort, who was heart and soul on his side, and table delicacies from summer climes and quite unknown to Greenvale found their way to her table. He even enlisted Nezer at fifty cents a day to go early to the schoolhouse, and have it well warmed ere Angie arrived, and if his loving care and thought missed any points in this practical wooing, they were trifling ones. When she demurred at so much attention and repeated her thanks, he would not listen.

"It's my own happiness I am hunting for," he said, "as well as yours, and I've many long years of neglect to make up. You needn't marry me until you feel ready to propose it, but you can't stop my loving you and doing for you, say what you choose."

They had an almost make-believe quarrel over the two thousand dollars he paid over to her by Dr. Sol.

"I positively refuse to touch it," Martin declared, when she handed him the identical

roll of bills. "It's yours by inheritance and law, and I won't have it on my hands."

"I don't consider it mine," she answered as firmly, "and I won't keep it, so what shall I do with it?"

"I don't care what you do with it," he exclaimed with mock grandiloquence in answer. "Give it to Hannah, to Nezer, to the parson, or to the poor, or whom you choose, but you can't make me take it. I may insist that you give me a deed of the property when I tender the balance of payment, but that is all. I only bought it to keep it away from strangers."

There were other rills of joy flowing her way these days besides Martin's devotion, and one reached her heart the closing day of her school, and in the form of an invitation to come to the schoolhouse the next Saturday and be her scholars' guest of honor. She could not even guess what was in store for her, and when Martin called to convey her thither, he refused to even hint it. She almost collapsed, however, when she once more stepped into the long-familiar room, for it was packed by all her pupils, and most of their parents, with Squire

Phinney as master of ceremonies. First came the singing of an improvised song with her name used, then the presentation of an album containing her scholars' pictures, with speech by the Squire, and lastly the good-bys. This finale was too much for poor Angie's composure, for as the little ones began to file by in due order, each to give and receive a kiss, her feelings gave way, and her face became a shower cloud. When the old folks' turn came, she could not speak, and after they had departed, and only Stella Phinney and Martin remained, she was still sobbing. To leave the room for the last time was almost as much a tax as parting from the school, for the ten years had imprinted every nook, cranny, and outline of that little temple on her heart, and when the door was closed and locked by Martin and the three drove away, she was still unable to speak.

The affair was a tribute she might well be proud of, for never before had its like occurred in Greenvale, and yet, when the horse's hoofs struck the old red bridge on their way home, to Angie they sounded like the rapid fall of clods upon a coffin.

"I can't undo my heartstrings," she said to Martin that night, "and to-day's experience has made me feel that I am like a ship without a rudder. I have lived with the growing ambitions of my little men and women so long, they have clung to me, and loved me, and I them, all these years, that they are part of my life. I am sure I shall feel like the prisoner who, after spending forty years in one cell each night, was released, only to go back there in a month and beg for the privilege of entering it again."

But Christmas day brought another mood to this more than lovable girl, and also a surprise to Martin. He had, as might be expected, almost filled her home with presents for all its members, a list too long for mention, and they had all eaten banquet dinner at the doctor's, and with music and games passed the afternoon. It was not a day celebrated as Thanksgiving was, and when nightfall came, Aunt Comfort led the way homeward.

"I shall see you this evening, I hope," Angie whispered to Martin ere she followed; "at least I want to. I've a little Christmas present waiting for you."

What it was he could not even guess—in fact did not expect any. His evenings there were usually passed in the sitting room, for the parlor was slow to warm now winter had come, and Aunt Comfort's presence was no bar to conversation with Angie. She also—like the wise mother she was—retired early, and did so to-night. Then, for a charming hour, Angie and Martin had the room to themselves. No mention of his own feelings or hopes was made by him—he had since the first abandoned that subject—and the school farewell, with books and the latest gossip, furnished topics. It was almost time for separation, and yet no mention of the Christmas token had been made by Angie.

"I thought I was to receive a present," he said at last, "or was it a joke?"

"It may prove a sorry one," she answered, "but I have one for you, and will go out and get it. When I return, I'll knock; you must then arise, close your eyes, and promise not to open them until I say the word."

Somewhat mystified, he promised, and for a long half hour he watched the fire and lis-



"HERE IS YOUR PRESENT," SHE WHISPERED — Page 395



tened to the clock. And that half hour seemed likely to never end.

At last came the knock, and he arose and dutifully closed his eyes. Soon he heard the door softly open and close, then a gentle, rustling step, and when, "Now you may look," was whispered, he opened his eyes. And what a vision greeted him, for there, glowing with blushes and half concealed beneath a veil stood Angie, a bride in dress and pose, with hands folded and eyes downcast. A woman beautiful as a sculptor's dream!

"Here is your present," she whispered at last, raising her love-lit eyes to his, "you have robbed me of my school — and — and — I must have some one to care for in place of it."

And now did he, or did he not consider that veil superfluous? Let me assure you, kind reader, I'll never tell.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE SPREAD OF HAPPINESS

Two months had elapsed since the spectre of Scar Face and David's torturing conscience had caused him to leap into oblivion, and he was almost forgotten. The Mizzy falls still poured out from beneath a sheathing of ice, and glittering pendants hung from the rocks beside it or swayed from the trees that bent toward it below. The mills were choked with snow, the great house near by was empty, not a footprint showed that the premises ever had a visitor, and the ghost that once haunted them had been banished. The gossips had more cheering subjects to discuss, and Martin's discovery of Amzi, his good Samaritan service and care for that pitiful man, old Cy's voluntary imprisonment with him in the far-away wilderness, and the hope that both would return in the spring, were discussed at every fireside. There was

also another topic of warm heart interest—the news that Angie and Martin were now openly pledged to marriage in the near future. It was not long in spreading, for when Angie somewhat penitently informed Aunt Comfort, that motherly soul first kissed and caressed her with tearful joy, and then straightway informed Aunt Lorey and (in the vernacular) “that settled it.”

The snow was deep, but that was no hindrance to Aunt Lorey, for before the sun had again risen on fair Greenvale, the important news was known all over the village.

And what a romantic tale of faithful devotion well rewarded it was, and how the congratulations and good wishes came showering upon Angie! For years she had lived her patient, helpful life, always thinking of and doing for others, bearing her own troubles and wrongs in silence, until she had grown very dear to the hearts of all, and now to come into her inherited rights and the crown of love and betrothal almost at once, with the prospect of again meeting a father supposed to be dead, was a reward greater than a fairy princess ever received.

And well deserved, as all considered.

Aunt Comfort shared the general love-feast of good-will and wishes, and Martin was also a hero. Dr. Sol was not forgotten, and even Nezer received a few crumbs for his plodding through the snow early every morning for weeks to build a rousing fire in the schoolhouse for Angie, — acts which were attributed to his devotion to her.

The social life of Greenvale also received a new impetus that winter, and evening gatherings of the middle aged and young folks, to which Angie and Martin were inevitably invited, became frequent. They were considered the guests of honor at all these simple functions, and none complete without them. Angie was, of course, the social star, who was sought as queen; her wishes were consulted, her suggestions were asked for, and she was forced to receive a homage she cared not at all for. The general sociability also culminated in several dances where she and Martin were obliged to lead the grand march, and she was besieged afterwards by would-be partners. Aunt Comfort also entered into the spirit of joyousness

and battled with Angie's sense of economy until an ample supply of new gowns and frocks were added to her wardrobe.

"You've been denyin' yerself 'n' going without things long 'nough," she said when the subject came up, "an' now you've got ter dress up, if I've got ter sit up nights sewin'. Then you've got ter consider Martin's feelin's. He's got man's nat'ral pride in you, that you mustn't forget."

He also "considered," and the costly hothouse flowers kept coming to Aunt Comfort's in spite of zero weather.

There was also another side to the social impetus, and that the religious one. The church that had been repaired by Martin, and where the Reverend Upson proclaimed what might be called the new school of thought, received good support and was well filled each Sabbath. Most of the audiences were composed of those who had grown lax in their church attendance, or seldom listened to the Reverend Jones, but many alternated between the two churches. It became a species of competition between the two preachers, which harmed neither and really

aided both by provoking widespread discussion out of church and more general interest in religion. The fact was the Reverend Jones had become old-fogyish, his arguments moss-covered, and the dry bones of Calvinism had lost their power. The newer ones of Unitarianism were more appealing to the broader minded, and even interested those who still held to the old theology. In a village like Greenvale nothing can be concealed, and the Reverend Upson's utterances each Sunday were quoted from house to house soon after, discussed in Phinney's store and Cap'n Tobey's tavern, and weighed and compared with Reverend Jones's sermons time and again, and it must be said that to those sturdy farmers who had wrangled on predestination, doubted Noah's maritime knowledge, and discussed the cause of Adam's fall for years, Parson Upson's theories seemed the more logical and his idea of God the more commendable. A curious and quite unexpected change came over the Reverend Jones as well, and he seemed like a preacher uncertain of his ground and anxious to conciliate and retain the good-will and confidence of even his own parishioners. In social life he

was less dogmatic and more ready to listen patiently to others' opinions, did not at once denounce those who differed with him even in trifles as formerly, and even admitted that his competitor in thought might have honest intentions and also be doing good. At first he had denounced Mr. Upson unsparingly. This tirade now ceased entirely, and when one evening the two chanced to meet in a social way, a surprise came, for a cordial hand-shake and most amiable chat followed.

A marvellous change also came in his sermons. Brimstone was banished, the wrath of God was seldom referred to, and a dozen other long-familiar points of creed were apparently forgotten. The character, attributes, and intentions of God also received a changed interpretation, and as Squire Phinney put it, after listening to one of Jones's newly liberal sermons, "It looks as though Parson Upson was goin' to convert Parson Jones."

Neither did the orthodox following decrease any as might be expected, for the changed tenor of preaching in that church provoked interest. More people went to church each Sunday, and

both were well attended. It was an outcome that gave good old Parson Jones more solace than he admitted, and almost as much satisfaction as that felt over Angie's good fortune. It must also be told that she contributed an ample share to his recent peace of mind, for her first business act, after Dr. Sol had been appointed administrator of her uncle's estate, was to obtain the church mortgage from him and present it to Parson Jones.

How that worthy man thanked and blessed her with a special prayer there and then, how he announced the joyous gift and fact in the pulpit the next Sunday, and how this gave an added impetus to her queenship over Greenvale, and the love and respect of all need not be described.

After many years of patient self-sacrifice and unrest, the bark of her life had suddenly sailed into golden and azure waters where the banks were festooned with the flowers of respect, and the birds of love and joy were singing.

And none envied her this new-found happiness.

CHAPTER XLIV

WEDDING BELLS

WHEN the pinks and syringas once more bloomed in Aunt Comfort's dooryard, and the lilacs beautified the weather-worn and moss-covered porch, there occurred a wedding in the old orthodox church. Martin would have preferred it in the one he had endowed, yet did not even hint that thought, for the most trifling will and wish of Angie was now law with him.

I say wedding, and yet rather might it have been called Greenvale's testimonial to the pair, for never had the village seen one like it. For weeks almost every one of the gentler sex was anxiously preparing suitable raiment; a dress-maker from the city had been called in for Angie, a trained quartette and professional musicians engaged for the grand occasion, and a carriage and span from Riverton to convey the united pair away. For two days dozens

of kindly hands labored to render the church more beautiful. Every window was draped with flowers and foliage, the altar hidden beneath lilacs and roses, a carpet was laid from street to door, and when the bride and groom arrived, every inch of standing room in the church was packed solid, with scores outside, while hardly a man, woman, or child in Green-vale was absent.

A double row of Angie's pupils flanked the carpeted walk, tossing flowers ahead of her as she entered. Two more privileged led the way up the aisle, scattering buds and blossoms, while the wedding-song, "O Promise Me," filled the fragrant air with divine melody.

Then came a hush; and the few sacred and time-honored words that have opened the doors of heavenly joy or heart-rending sorrow to millions, a fervent prayer from the lips of Minister Jones, never before equalled by him, and a feeling in the hearts of many that God had entered the temple with the bridal pair.

Words were weak fitly to describe such an event and even less so the moods of all participants. It was a meeting of the rills of joy and

sorrow, ever flowing alike from all human hearts, as well as a union of two finite beings, and those with gray hair were left to mourn. To Angie it was a sacred and solemn step much akin to the thought of Christ on the cross, and only by superhuman effort did she restrain her tears until the seclusion of Aunt Comfort's was reached again. Love to her meant utter self-abnegation and marriage a pledge to live for, and if need be, to die for another. And when the dear old home enclosed her once more, emotion conquered all resolution.

"Ye mustn't take on so," Aunt Comfort whispered brokenly, when she clasped Angie for the final parting, "it'll break my heart when ye're gone. Ye've been a great blessin' to me all these years, 'n' I want to see ye start off happy. It's nat'ral ye should, 'n' when I can't see yer face no more, I want ter think on 't ez smilin'. It's all that's left me."

Over that hallowed journey to and through the wilderness where the streams wound between fir-clad banks, the waves rippled upon the shores of sparkling lakes, the spruce trees played hide and seek in the camp-fire light, and

the song-birds woke them to say, "Thank God for this doubly blessed existence," a veil shall be drawn.


Neither need a question be raised as to how she met and cared for that poor old hermit, or how, at sight of her sweet face once more, old Cy felt as if an angel had entered the forest.

But of those left waiting in Greenvale, good old Aunt Comfort deserves the last word and shall have it.

For her the sun of life had almost set; her heart had rolled away in the carriage with the child she had reared, and she had naught left except memory and that faded blouse and cap in the attic chamber. Desolation and heart hunger were her portion; tears followed the wrinkles in her kindly face and her gray head was bent low in sorrow.

When life seems most joyous to us, we think not, but when trouble comes, or at the end, when our eyes are closing and memory fading, it is mother's face that hovers over us at last.

THE END





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The hermit

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